

THE STARLESS NIGHT

As the wife of Henry Delair, Mary possessed everything which makes for happiness in life, and on the twentieth anniversary of their wedding, felt herself to be as secure in his love as on the day she married him. What, then, must the shock have been, to hear that there was another woman in Henry's life, and learn the truth from the girl herself—Sylvia Crayle—who discloses it to Mary in the hope of persuading her to grant Henry his freedom and agree to a divorce?

Bewildered and bitterly hurt, Mary returns home from London where the interview takes place, with the knowledge that she has lost her husband's love, feeling as though her world were in ruins, but resolved to guard Henry's secret and disgrace from his family, and save their marriage for the sake of her children, regardless of what suffering she brought on herself.

Set in a small Somerset village, with lovable everyday characters, this story tells of a woman's faith and courage; and how her night of grief passes, to bring once more a dawn of peace and ultimate happiness.

Also by Margaret Harrison

TOMORROW'S DAYLIGHT
THE SEASON OF SONG
A TIME OF LOVE
THE IMPATIENT HEART
YOU'LL LOVE ME YET
WHERE I MARRY
TRUST THOU THY LOVE
A JOY MORE GENTLE
THE SWEETNESS OF FORGIVING
LOVE LIKE A SHADOW

The Starless Night

MARGARET HARRISON

*"The Shadow of a Starless Night was thrown
Over a world in which I moved alone."*

SHELLEY



W. H. ALLEN
LONDON

1918

Chapter One

ON just such an early spring morning as this, Mary Ellison, in the traditional white satin and clouds of tulle, had walked up the aisle on her father's arm and been given in marriage to Henry Delair. Now, coming into her pleasant breakfast-room and seeing Henry—a little more lined about the face, and with a sprinkling of grey in his thick dark hair—Mary knew herself to be a fortunate woman, because on this twentieth anniversary of their wedding, she and Henry were as deeply in love with each other as when they first became husband and wife. Not, Mary thought amusedly, putting slices of bread in the electric toaster and giving Henry his second cup of coffee, that he would remember what day it was, unless somebody jogged his memory, and Viola it seemed was the one to do that, by coming into the room and saying: "Many happy returns of the day, darling," as she bent down to kiss her mother's cheek. Which remark made Henry lay aside *The Times* and ask: "Is it your birthday, Mary?" then add, apologetically: "I'm sorry, dear; you must forgive me, but I can never remember the date."

Viola, pouring sugar over her grapefruit, said reprovingly: "Really, Daddy, you are the limit! It's the anniversary of your wedding. Twenty years ago today, at this very moment, Mummy was walking up the aisle

on Grandfather's arm, with two pages holding her train and four bridesmaids bringing up the rear."

"Oh, no, I wasn't," said Mary. She glanced at the clock. "I was having my breakfast—they brought it up to me, I remember, on a tray—and dared me to come out of my room until I left it for good and drove to the church."

"You were ten minutes late," said Henry. "And I got into a bit of a state, thinking you'd changed your mind and didn't intend to marry me after all." He smiled across at Mary. "Anyway—many happy returns, darling, to both of us. Sorry I forgot."

"I don't expect Mummy will hold it against you. I wonder"—Viola heaved a sigh—"what I'll feel like on my wedding-day. Awful, I imagine; unless, of course, I'm desperately in love with the man whoever he is."

"Well," Henry said, comfortably, "you need not start worrying about that just yet. You're only—what? Seventeen?"

"Eighteen, darling; last month. The same age as Mummy was when she married you. Not but what I intend to wait and have some fun before tying myself up for life. I don't want to be shackled. Poor Mummy was only twenty when Rick and I were born. It must have been dreadful for her—to have twins as young as that."

Mary laughed. "On the contrary, I was very pleased and proud. Because you were the loveliest babies . . . at least, I thought so, and I rather liked the idea of having two at once."

"I still think you were noble. Especially", Viola went on, reaching across for the marmalade, "as the war started, and Daddy had to go away and leave you to cope with everything. And he hardly ever got leave—

you've told me that, Mummy, heaps of times—because he was on all this hush-hush stuff even then. I suppose his silly old bosses were terrified to let him out of their sight, in case he got into the enemies' hands."

Mary said indulgently: "Darling child, what nonsense you talk!" while Henry, smiling to himself and thinking that his daughter, though she didn't know it, had got very near to the truth, pushed back his chair and walked towards the door. He said: "I'm sorry I can't be at home today, Mary. If only I'd remembered in time I would have arranged things differently and taken you out to lunch. As it is, I've got a man coming down from the War Office, and I can't possibly put him off."

"Of course, dear; I understand." Mary followed him out to the hall. "Does that mean you won't be home to dinner?"

"I'm not sure. I'll do my best, but don't worry if I'm late. Good-bye, darling; take care of yourself, and have a happy day."

Hetty, the parlour-maid, was standing by the front door, to open it for Henry after handing him his hat and gloves; and Mary waited, sunning herself on the steps, until he had crossed the courtyard and got into the official car which always called for him, and was driven this morning by an exceptionally pretty girl, immaculate and trim in her sage green uniform, who gave Henry a dutiful: "Good morning, sir," and closed the door on him with every sign of respect. Watching the car turn at the bottom of the lane, Mary thought: "I suppose Henry is rather an important person to them; and it's a mercy he's so keen on his job. Though, to my mind, the world would be a happier place if they left this nuclear business alone. Modern warfare is too

awful to contemplate; and it all seems so needless, and doesn't fit in with the beauty of our English spring."

Her gaze wandered across the fields to small thatched cottages, and distant farms, each with their orchards a sea of pink and white blossom; then came back to rest on the house which she had first entered as a bride and loved so much. Built in the latter part of the sixteenth century, it had a small forecourt, paved with flag-stones and bordered by clumps of irises which, before long, would be in full bloom and flaunting their blue and yellow beauty against the grey walls of the house. The gardens of "Little Court" were at the back: Mary's white-panelled drawing-room looked upon a smooth green lawn, where two graceful cedar trees spread their branches, and flowers of every scent and colour grew in profusion, because Mary had "green fingers", and the gardens, by tacit consent, were her concern. Except for the more laborious work—Henry helped with this if he felt inclined; and Roderick did his share when he was at home; and that, Mary remembered, as she went into the house, would be the day after tomorrow, unless he decided to stay in London over the week-end, and go back to Cambridge from there; in which case, she wouldn't see him until June, when the Easter term ended. Meanwhile—the post had arrived, and Mary picked up a pile of letters off the hall table. Most of them were for Henry, of course: some directed to Dr. Delair—others to Henry Delair, Esq., D.Sc., and one correspondent, she noticed, had designated him as Professor, which made her laugh, because the only other professor she'd known was a friend of her father's, who'd been about eighty and worn a long grey beard; and ever since then Mary had connected the name professor with beards and spectacles, and old, old men,

though there were plenty, she knew, as young as Henry, or even younger, perhaps. Turning the letters over, she found two for herself, and a post card from Roderick, stating in his appalling handwriting that he would be returning home on Thursday, with an added PS. "Don't forget to kill the fatted calf," which, Mary thought, was singularly apt; because Roderick, though no prodigal, spent most of his time away from home, and once he'd left Cambridge (they had given him deferment to take his degree) he would be called up for National Service, and see even less of his family, then; unless, as Mary hoped, being a devoted mother, he happened to get posted somewhere within reasonable distance of Oakbridge, and able to come home for the week-ends.

Viola, calling from the breakfast-room, wanted to know if the letters had come, and whether there was anything from Rick, and Mary said: "Yes, a card. He'll be back on Thursday," and added: "Take Daddy's letters into the study, darling, and put them on his desk. They're out here—on the hall table. I'm all behind this morning, and haven't done a thing."

She pushed open the baize door at the end of a passage, and went into the kitchen to give cook her orders for the day, though it might be more truthful to say, that Mary listened whilst Mrs. Traile made suggestions, which weren't suggestions at all, because she had already decided what the family should eat, and even telephoned the tradesmen for the requisite joint and fish. This visit to the kitchen, Mary knew, was pure farce, but she didn't mind in the least.

Mrs. Traile, known affectionately to the family as "Cookie" and Mrs. by courtesy only, since she held a very poor opinion of men, had been at "Little Court"

for nearly forty years, first ~~as~~[!] kitchen-maid, then as cook, and was loved and valued accordingly. At five years old, Henry, for reasons of his own, had dubbed her "my white pig", and sometimes referred to her as such, but endearingly and only, of course, behind her back; though Cookie loved him so much that, even if she'd heard the appellation, it is doubtful whether she would have taken offence. Now, having told Mary exactly what the family were to be given for lunch and dinner, she felt entitled to a little gossip, and regaled her mistress with the misdoings of Sarah Culling's daughter, who, it seemed, was running after Sam Bigley and trying to break up his marriage, which, by all accounts, was a perfectly happy one, only Sam had always been a bit weak where women were concerned.

"But that's men all over," Cookie said, putting an egg-whisk into a bowl of batter, and starting to turn the handle vigorously. "Never content with one; harems is what most of them want; though it'd come a bit expensive these days, keeping a dozen wives in food. Which reminds me," she added, rather ambiguously, "it's your anniversary, isn't it, ma'am? And I must wish you very many happy returns of the day. To think—it's twenty years ago! I can see the master, now, setting off for London, the morning before his wedding. We were all called into the hall to wish him well. And I remember Mr. Penly, the butler—we had a butler, then, the poor creature was blown up in the war—saying how happy Mr. Henry looked; and no wonder, considering the lovely young lady he was marrying—if you'll forgive me, ma'am, for speaking so personal."

Mary, putting both arms around Mrs. Traile's very substantial waist and giving her a hug, said: "Nobody minds personalities, Cookie, when they're as nice as

that. And thank you for your good wishes. By the way —Mr. Roderick will be home Thursday, so if you could make one of your extra special cakes. . . .”

“It’s already done and in the oven. I knew he’d come back, because I dreamt about ice and snow, last night. A regular blizzard, it was; and that foretells the return of a dearly loved relative to the house.”

“Oh, I see! Well,” Mary said, a little helplessly, “I’m glad you were warned. And d’you think we could have a caramel for dinner Thursday night? Rick does love them so much.”

“That also is all arranged,” Cookie said calmly, and with dignity. “I ought to know by this time what the family likes in the way of food. You just leave everything to me, ma’am, and don’t give it another thought. But if you’re going upstairs and should see Hetty, perhaps you’d tell her to come down here to me straight away. It doesn’t take all this time to make two beds, but she’s been dawdling. And I suppose, because young madam is butler-trained, and calls herself a parlour-maid, she thinks the bedrooms are nothing to do with her.”

“Well, they aren’t really a parlour-maid’s work, Cookie; we must be fair. Only Hetty was told she’d have to do them, when I engaged her, and didn’t seem to mind. I think she’s a nice girl; and I’ve always found her very willing. Another thing,” Mary added, diplomatically, “Hetty likes working under you. She told me how kind and helpful you’d been; and I said I wasn’t surprised, because you spoiled us all.”

“Never! Did you really, ma’am! Yes; I agree, Hetty’s willing enough. And I’m glad the girl’s happy. I don’t want miserable faces around in my kitchen, and that’s a fact.” Cookie looked and sounded pleased; and Mary,

feeling she had handled the matter tactfully and put everything right, decided she must go and see her mother-in-law before starting on the flowers, and her usual odd jobs, otherwise she'd be wondering what had happened to everyone, and, most likely, sending Jane down to find out.

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The elder Mrs. Delair had her own suite of rooms in the south wing, but seldom if ever moved out of them, because it meant being carried downstairs in an invalid chair, and this, she said, caused other people a lot of bother, besides a certain amount of pain and inconvenience to herself. Five years ago—actually on the last run of the season, she'd been badly thrown when her horse refused a ditch—probably because there was water the other side; and, as everyone knew, some horses would never take water in their stride. It seemed the only possible reason why the accident should have happened, but Henry, upon being told the terrible news, had refused to accept the explanation of his mother's fall.

"She's ridden almost as soon as she could walk, and hunted at least twice—sometimes three times a week. And though 'Starlight' was inclined to be a bit temperamental, Mother could always handle him. She wasn't a 'thruster', either. There must have been something else; and I wish to heaven I knew what it was and the person responsible."

Not that it made any difference, now. Her hunting days were over: the nearest she got to following hounds, was to watch them from her bed by the window, going

past the house; with the huntsmen and "whip", and practically the whole village, either mounted or on foot (the Master wouldn't allow a car to come within a mile of him) bringing up the rear. And if Netta Delair thought, as she often did, that it wasn't worth being crippled for life, just to have a few hours' pleasure, she was fair enough to admit, that people who took risks must be prepared to put up with the consequences. It did no good to rail against Fate for something you'd brought on yourself; and she had no intention of making everyone else miserable, by moaning over the past and her own sufferings.

When Mary came upstairs this morning, Mrs. Delair, with the help of Jane Ryle, her nurse-companion, was getting dressed. She said: "Oh, is it you, Mary! How are you, my pet? Very many happy returns of the day. I hope Henry's given you a nice present. Men so often buy utterly useless objects, which we put away in a drawer and pass over to somebody else when they're having a bazaar."

"He's sent me flowers; they've just this second arrived." Mary bent down to kiss her mother-in-law. "He must have stopped in Oakbridge and ordered them. Masses of white and yellow tulips, and mimosa."

Mrs. Delair nodded. "A very nice gesture, dear, but, I imagine, only a preliminary to something better. You'll find that Henry will arrive home this evening with an interesting-looking parcel, or perhaps a jeweller's box."

"He probably won't get back until long after I'm in bed." Mary sighed. "Poor darling! I do wish he would take things a little easier, and not be quite so conscientious about his job."

"Well, you can't alter him, my child; and I doubt if

you'd want to, really." Mrs. Delair closed her eyes and lay back on the bed. "Wait a moment, Jane. Everything seems to be hurting me, this morning. I think I'll wear a house-gown and not bother to dress."

"That's a good idea." Jane spoke crisply, her reflexes being those of an efficient and properly trained nurse to a patient's request. "I'll fetch it for you. Which one, Mrs. Delair? Your blue or the red?"

"I don't honestly mind; whichever you see first. That girl", Mrs. Delair went on, as Jane went out of the room, "gets prettier every day. But I like her. . . . I like her immensely. And for all that fragile, wind-flower look, she's as strong as a little ox. She can pick me up in her arms as though I were no heavier than a baby of eighteen months."

"Well, you don't weigh much more, Mother. You're terribly thin, darling. Besides, they're trained to lift people. D'you remember that tiny little nurse we had for Henry, when he broke his leg? And how she hoisted him about? I offered to help her, once, but never again. She was dreadfully affronted, and told me—politely, of course, to keep out of her way." Mary laughed; then added: "I'll go now, Mother dear, and leave you in peace. Oh! and Ricky's coming home on Thursday. He sent me a card."

"I'm so glad; I mean, glad that we shall have him for a few days at least. Term starts on the 13th, doesn't it? I always get a bit muddled, because Henry was at Oxford and they're a little later, I believe. Don't go, Mary, unless you must. There was something I had to tell you. . . . I remember now; it's about Colin. I received a letter from him this morning."

Mary said: "Oh, did you!" She waited a moment. "And what has he to say for himself?"

"Need you ask!" Mrs. Delair seemed amused, but there was a slightly ironic twist to the smile curving her humorous mouth. "Colin's letters are always the same; so much so, that I sometimes wonder why he doesn't make a record of them and send it to me. As usual, this one was packed with information regarding his own concerns, but didn't tell me anything. And not a word about Primrose, of course, except for a postscript, saying they were all in the best of health. He also sent a special message to you, Mary. Apparently he's ringing up this evening, and hopes you'll stay in to take the call."

"Well——" Mary hesitated. "I don't know; I may have to go out. Did he say what time he would ring?"

"No; but it won't be before six o'clock or after ten-thirty. I'm sure of that. Colin will certainly avail himself of the cheaper rates: unless he reverses the charge, in which case, he won't give a thought to the cost."

"Yes; I sec. I suppose I'd better be here. You're quite sure he wants to speak to me and not Henry? It seems so odd. I wonder", Mary said, a little worriedly, "what it's all about."

"Nothing of any great importance, dear. Colin likes to make mysteries out of the simplest things." Mrs. Delair spoke reassuringly and gave her daughter-in-law an affectionate glance. At the same time she was thinking: "If Colin were hard up he would appeal to Henry as he always does, so it can't be money he wants. Unless—Henry has already refused to help him, and he's hoping Mary will. Would he, though, ask her for money? It's a dreadful thing to do; and I can't somehow sec Colin sinking quite as low as that."

She wondered, then, a little sadly, why, since her sons had had the same upbringing, they should be so

entirely different; not only in character, but as regards their behaviour and general outlook on life. They were poles apart: Henry, so steadfast . . . the kind of man people knew they could rely on and trust implicitly; he had never caused her a moment's anxiety, at least, not willingly; whereas with Colin, it seemed, she'd had nothing else. Why should the careful training given to both have borne fruit with one and not the other? She had seen the same thing happen in countless families as well as her own, but whether it were the fault of the parents or children she didn't know.

Mary, noticing her mother-in-law's abstraction, said: "You're very quiet, Mother. Is the pain very bad? I'll go, shall I? Perhaps you could have a little sleep."

"Not before lunch, dear; and the pain's no worse than usual. I was just thinking . . . about all sorts of things, but mostly of Colin." Mrs. Delair waited a moment; then asked: "You've always got on well with Colin, haven't you, Mary?"

"Yes; we're quite good friends. Of course, I should have to like him for Henry's sake, but apart from that, I think he's rather a dear: and very charming. I mean—Colin has the dangerous attraction which is difficult to resist."

"I know," Mrs. Delair's sigh was rueful. "So does he, unfortunately. It has always got him exactly what he wants. All the same, Mary, although there might be no real harm in him, he is, I'm sorry to say, an unsatisfactory person—my poor Colin! And so unlike his brother that I sometimes think he must be a changeling!"

Mary laughed. "You can't get away with that, Mother. Anyone could tell Henry and Colin were brothers. They're absurdly alike in feature and colour-

ing; though Henry's eyes, I think, are a darker grey; and . . ."

"And he is, of course, the better-looking of the two. That's what you wanted to say, but being a nice and properly brought up girl, you stopped yourself in time."

"Well, one shouldn't compare, but, naturally, I consider *my* husband is the handsomest man on earth, because I'm his wife. And I daresay Primrose says exactly the same of Colin."

"I've no doubt she does; she probably regards him as a second Adonis. Actually, I find Primrose's attitude to Colin infuriating! She fairly grovels at times, and is much too ready to go down on her knees. And that's no way for a wife to behave . . . certainly not one with a husband of Colin's type. I've often felt I wanted to shake her," Mrs. Delair said, calmly, "and probably would have done, if I hadn't been flat on my back. There's somebody outside, Mary. See who it is; and you might call Jane. I can't think what she's doing all this time. After that, you may go about your lawful occasions. I won't hinder you any more."

Viola, putting her head around the door, said: "Is Mummy here?" Then: "Good morning, Granny. How are you today?" Wearing jodhpurs and a blue Ballantyne jersey, she reminded one of a lovely Shakespearian boy; and leaning over the bed, her soft ash-blonde hair swept the pillows, as she kissed her grandmother's cheek.

Mrs. Delair said: "I'm very well, thank you, darling. And you—what are you doing this morning? Riding, I imagine, judging by your clothes."

"No; I'm going up to the kennels. May I have the car, Mummy? They're 'walking' hounds today, and I promised Jim I'd be there to give him a hand."

Mary hesitated. She said: "Must you, Viola? I mean

—if Jim needs help, there are plenty of men available for the job. Colonel Witlock will probably do it himself.”

“He won’t, Mummy; he can’t. It’s Court day, and he’s got to be on the Bench, or wherever it is they sit. And Jim offered to take the dog pack out today—he loves ‘walking’ hounds. So do I. Please, Mummy, it’s all right, I promise. Please let me go. And I’ll borrow one of the kennelmen’s coats, if you’re afraid I shall ‘niff’ houndy and spoil my clothes.”

“It isn’t that at all. I’m not concerned with your clothes. It’s just . . . oh, very well! Since you promised, I suppose you’ll have to keep your word. But another time, darling, don’t make these rather rash engagements, without first asking me whether I approve or not. And while I think of it; the fields will be terribly soggy, so you had better take your Wellingtons.”

“Yes, all right, Mummy. Actually, I’ve already put them in the car. And I won’t forget the other thing—I mean, about asking you, first.” Viola gave her mother a hurried but grateful kiss and ran out of the room, coming back the next second to say: “Thank you for letting me go. I always knew, though, that you were an angel, and the nicest mother in the world.”

Then she was gone again; and a few minutes later they heard her start the car and drive away from the house.

Breaking a short silence, Mrs. Delair said: “Well, that’s that. Why are you looking so worried, Mary? Or oughtn’t I to ask?”

“Yes, of course, Mother. I’m not exactly worried; it’s only—I wish Viola weren’t seeing quite so much of Jim Olivet. She’s just at the romantic age; and I’m a little anxious as to where this friendship is going to lead.”

"But, my dear child!" Mrs. Delair's beautifully arched brows were raised in protest. "The man's old enough to be her father. He's forty if he's a day."

"He is a very attractive man, Mother; he also has a wife—a wife, unfortunately, who doesn't share his love of hunting, or for 'walking' hounds. It seems they haven't a thing in common. Apparently, Mr. Olivet is a character misunderstood! And he hasn't any happiness in the home."

"Good gracious! How on earth do you know that, Mary? Does he say so himself?"

"Yes; but only into a few specially chosen and sympathetic ears; and Viola's happens to be one of them. All this—'my wife doesn't understand me'—stuff adds to his attraction, of course. Viola got quite sentimental over what she was pleased to call 'Jimmy's wrongs'; but, as the child came straight away and confided them to me, she obviously isn't trying to hide anything from us, thank God!"

"Then what in the world are you worrying about? The fact of her doing that shows everything's all right. Besides, Viola is a sensible little creature, and she's as good as gold. She knows perfectly well that it's wrong to go falling in love with married men, however attractive they are. Or if she doesn't—I mean, if you and Henry haven't bothered to give your children any kind of moral training, which, by the way, I very much doubt! you may be sure that Father Cleever will enlighten her on the point; and in no uncertain terms."

"Yes; you're quite right." Mary sighed. "It's just that I'm afraid she'll get hurt. Girls are so silly, Mother. . . . I was silly, myself, at eighteen; until I met Henry and fell in love with him."

"Which shows you weren't as silly as you think."

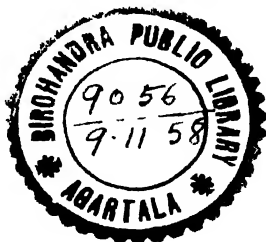
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Mrs. Delair smiled. "Because Henry would never have married a stupid woman; he had no use for them. Beauty without brains would have bored him stiff. And by choosing you, he was lucky enough to get both."

Mary shook her head. "That's a lovely thing to say to me, darling, but I'm afraid it's not true. Now I really am going. There are the flowers and all the shopping to 'do. Can I bring you anything from the village, Mother?"

"No thank you, dear. Oh yes! some stamps. A five-shilling book. And see if you can find Jane. She must have gone downstairs to do my flowers. I think I shall dress after all. I always feel better when I'm clothed and in my right mind, as it were. And Mary—try not to worry about Viola, but if you must, why don't you tell Henry, and let him handle the affair?"

"Well, I could." Mary turned at the door. Then added, decidedly, "No; I'll leave it for the moment. I'd rather not bother him. He's got quite enough to cope with already," and came away, leaving Mrs. Delair thinking as she so often did, how nice it was that Mary called her "Mother", and how grateful she ought to be to Henry, for giving her such a good and loving daughter-in-law.



Chapter Two

PRIOR'S OAK was a quaint little village and had an unusual and undeniable charm of its own, so that artists, and others who imagined they were, could often be seen either standing or sitting on stools with easels in front of them, sketching the old half-timbered houses in the High Street which were sandwiched between a few tiny bow-windowed shops. Like most country folk, the villagers worked hard but lived tranquilly; they were conservative in their ideas, and suspected changes of any kind, and, because the farmers needed land for grazing, they hung on to it, and the only ground cut up into building plots was a useless field or two just beyond the village green. These had been bought by a speculator who erected some detached, four-bedroomed villas, and sold them to men who, having worked in Oakbridge all day, liked the idea of returning to a country house, and having a garden in which they could potter around. That the villas were of uniform design and entirely without character, didn't worry the owners, but many of the older inhabitants viewed their pebble-dashed frontages and circular bays with distaste, and wondered what the world was coming to, when houses could be run up in a matter of months, and people were foolish enough to give three thousand pounds for them. Their attitude was really based on a fear that this building out on the

Court Road was the thin edge of the wedge; and Prior's Oak would, in time, lose its charm and individuality and become nothing more than a suburb of Oakbridge.

But as Henry pointed out to Mary, people must be housed, and it was ridiculous to think you could go on living in the past, and keep things exactly as they were in Victoria's reign, and Mary, of course, had agreed with him. She knew, however, and admitted quite honestly, that she wouldn't want to exchange her own beautiful home for a modern villa—even one of those on the Court Road, which, apparently, had all the latest domestic appliances, and were, she felt sure, far more convenient to run than Little Court. She was glad, too, when, having passed them on her way to the village this morning, she could leave the newly-made road and walk across the Green, where huge chestnut trees were uncurling their leaves to show red and white candles, and a scent of lilacs pervaded the air. There was nothing here to offend the eye; every building within sight had grace and dignity—the church and its adjoining vicarage, a stately Tudor house with rosy walls; the two-hundred-year-old inn, double fronted and with an ancient signboard depicting The Lamb and Fleece. Further on, bordering the Green, were three little pink-brick, Queen Anne houses standing in a row. They had white chains linking their gates, and Mary always thought how fortunate it was that the right kind of people lived in them.

The Honourable Mrs. Taplow, whose husband had been the very much younger son of what she herself described as "the poorest peer in christendom", occupied number one, and managed, nobody knew how, to keep going on her minute income which seemed con-

siderably less now than when her husband was alive, for the simple reason that everything had soared in price. Her daughter, Alice, was a distinguished girl who would have been beautiful, if she'd had the money to spend on clothes, and buy the dozen and one things women seem to need to improve their looks. But most of poor Alice's dresses and suits came to her second-hand, passed on from Cousin George's wife who had already worn them for years. Because, Cousin George, the present Lord Chelm, was quite as poor, if not poorer, than his grandfather had been, and Cousin Emmie, in consequence, seldom had new clothes. Not only that, Lady Chelm's taste ran to nigger brown, or serviceable shades of green and grey, none of which suited Alice's colouring, so one could hardly wonder that she looked as she did. Actually, Alice didn't care two straws: she enjoyed life because she was happy in herself, and loved by everyone; so what did it matter if she went about wearing shabby tweeds and rather washed-out cotton frocks which were also a little too short for her.

Tommy Fraser, who lived at number two, always said that Alice was the only natural and really uninhibited girl he'd ever met: he said it as he said everything now, jerkily and with difficulty, speaking out of the corner of his mouth; because only one side of Tommy's face was of any use to him, the other being quite dead, as far as feeling was concerned. But then, as he liked to point out, if somebody hadn't been mighty quick on the spot, and arrived just as his plane went up in flames, he wouldn't have had even half a face. And the doctors had done a wizard job; they'd patched him up nicely—patched, Tommy thought, smiling his queer crooked smile, was the right word—

and gone to endless trouble to find an eye which would match up with his good one; just, he supposed, to make him look a little more respectable. Like Alice Taplow, Tommy was loved by everyone; but, unlike Alice, if he enjoyed life, it wasn't because of an inward happiness, but his extreme bravery. There were times when dark moods came over him, and he was tempted to take the easy way out, but they didn't last long. Besides, he had Joe to fall back upon; Joe was always at hand to help him through, just as he'd been sixteen years ago when they'd flown together. A stout fellow, Joe; one of the crew—his sergeant navigator, then; now his servant and friend, willing, or rather choosing, to bury himself in the country, just so that he could be with his late Squadron Leader and look after him.

Miss Perry, who lived next door at number three, once accused Tommy of hanging on to Joe because, years ago, he was an assistant chef in one of the big London hotels and could cook. But then—Miss Perry often said things like that, and nobody minded or took offence, since Miss Perry was a privileged person, and could speak her thoughts if she had a mind to do so. Her father, old Canon Perry, had died eighteen months ago, but he'd held the living of Prior's Oak for over fifty years, and Miss Perry still felt responsible for the village, and sometimes forgot that she was no longer the vicar's daughter, but merely one of Mr. Austley's parishioners. They were, however, the best of friends; Miss Perry had even forgiven him for shutting off part of the vicarage and allowing strangers to come and live there, which, in view of its having fourteen bedrooms and five downstairs rooms, not to mention vast kitchens and several outhouses, seemed the obvious and most sensible thing to do; especially as the authorities ap-

proved, and gave Mr. Austley their blessing as well as permission to house people less fortunate than himself.

Miss Perry, it must be admitted, was very angry at the time, because she and her brothers and sisters—ten of them altogether—had been born at the vicarage, and she couldn't bear to think of changes being made in her old home. But after a while she realized that her attitude was both selfish and wrong, and being a generous-minded woman, she admitted it, not only to Mr. Austley but everyone else. Now, seeing Mary passing her house, Miss Perry rapped on the window, and a moment later came out and slammed the door, saying as she did so: "Good morning, Mary. I suppose you're going to the village. So am I. We may as well walk along together; unless you want to gallop ahead. Have you lots of shopping to do?"

"No; I've only to call at Mercers and order tomorrow's joint, and get some stamps for mother. What about you? Couldn't I do your errands, Maude? I can bring anything you want and leave it on my way home."

Miss Perry, who had an enormous bunch of white lilac in one hand and a basket of eggs in the other, which were being taken to cheer and nourish a very sick girl, said: "I'm leaving these with Katy Binns. She's been rather low in herself since the baby died, poor little soul, and Will is still out of a job; so I think perhaps I ought to see her. Then I've got to get some fish for Binko. He's completely off meat: just turns up his nose at it and walks away from the plate."

"Well, that's all right. I mean—I'm in no hurry. I was going to suggest we went and had coffee at The Mandarin Café. The woman who is running it now

makes marvellous cakes, so I've been told, but it would be rather nice to taste them and find out for ourselves exactly what they're like."

"I won't . . . thank you all the same, Mary. For one thing, I never eat between meals; it ruins one's digestive organization, and I shouldn't enjoy my lunch if I did. And another—Tommy's Joe is coming in to show me how to make a lemon sponge, so I must be back by twelve."

"The whole art with lemon sponges is in the beating. You have to beat for hours. I'm no cook," Mary said, modestly, "but I do know that."

"You need not tell me about the beating, Mary, because I've done it; and always got the same result. Try as I will, I can never achieve that honeycomb effect or make them stand upright. My lemon sponges flop all over the dish. Anyway—we'll see what a few lessons from Joe will do." Miss Perry stopped outside a cottage and shifted the basket to her other arm and opened the gate. She said: "Don't wait, Mary. I'll just pop in and see Katy, and you go off and do your shopping, and enjoy your coffee and cakes. Try and get one of those tables in the window; then you'll be able to see what's going on and quiz the passers-by."

But this Mary was unable to do, because, upon arriving at the café, she found it unusually full and only one table available, which, being up in a corner, close to the cash desk, was rather cramped and uncomfortable. She sat down and took off her gloves and ordered coffee and cakes from the waitress, suddenly aware that several people were bowing and smiling to her across the tables, and some even waving a hand. She did, of course, know everyone in the room, and everyone knew her; if not intimately, at least by sight, but most of

them, she noticed, looking around, were friends who came to her house.

There was Dr. Fabian, able for once to snatch half an hour from his rushed and toilsome day, to give Mrs. Fabian her morning cup of coffee and thirty minutes of his company: Mr. and Mrs. Austley, with their eight-months'-old baby sound asleep in a Moses basket placed on the chair next to them; Sir Walter Ringcross, the Q.C., and his son—an exceptionally handsome boy, wearing the uniform of a Dartmouth cadet, and looking, if the truth were told, more than a little bored. They must have come down to The Court to get in a few days' hunting before the last Meet of the season. Nothing else would induce Sir Walter and Lady Ringcross to stay in Prior's Oak at this time of the year.

It was a mixed bag, and Mary knew that all of them were here in this small, tightly-packed room, simply because it was the only place to go for the coffee and light refreshments which nobody really needed but always seemed to want. She thought, amusedly, how impossible it would be for any one of them—herself included—to carry on an *affaire* or behave indiscreetly, without the entire village being aware of the fact; and how lucky it was that they had nothing to hide. Because, though Prior's Oak had its faithless husbands and wives; its flighty daughters and ne'er-do-well sons, the majority of the inhabitants led blameless lives, and wrong-doing was not encouraged, but rather, frowned upon and strongly condemned.

It was then that Mary saw Mrs. Taplow and Alice standing by the door, looking around for a table, and she beckoned them to come over and share hers. Sitting down with the air of one who has sought rest without much hope of finding it. Mrs. Taplow said:

"I imagine you meant us to join you, Mary, though actually, it makes no difference. I'm not getting up again for anyone. I can't. Alice has walked me here from Oakbridge. The whole three miles; and in these shoes! I don't know what's wrong with them, but never in my life have I worn such uncomfortable brutes." She added: "Do, like an angel, order coffee and rolls for two," and leant back in her chair with a sigh of relief, while Alice dumped a loaded shopping basket on the floor, and took off her shabby brown gloves.

Clearing a space for the waitress to put the cups and plates, Mrs. Taplow said: "We met your good man in Oakbridge. He told us it was your wedding anniversary, so I guessed that the beautiful flowers he had just ordered were for you. It's twenty years ago, isn't it, Mary? What a child you must have been! And you were married at that lovely church in Bayswater—the one that got bombed. I can never remember its name."

"You mean, St. Mary of the Angels," said Mary. "Yes, it was a beautiful church—the most beautiful in London, I always thought."

"I suppose you had a white wedding, and a huge reception afterwards, with lots of champagne?" Alice's voice sounded a little wistful.

Mary smiled. "Well, it wasn't quite like that. I wore white, of course, but Henry and I were married during Lent, so the wedding was a quiet one, and only a few intimate friends came to the reception. You see," she went on, "we wanted my brother to marry us; and as he was in charge of one of the pilgrimages to Lourdes, and would be away for several weeks, we had to fit in with him. Also, there was a chance of Henry being sent abroad—either to France or Germany, and since he

refused to leave me behind, things were more or less taken out of our hands."

Mrs. Taplow, whose mind, whilst she was drinking her coffee, had been on the past, said suddenly: "You had a lot of trouble, Mary, during the first few years of your married life. First--you lost your mother, which, of course, was a terrible grief. Then the war started. I remember so well, the day Henry left--seeing you in the High Street with a nurse pushing Rick and Viola in their double perambulator. You looked completely lost--as though part of you had died. And in 1940, or was it 1941, your father was killed when the London Hospital got bombed. A life thrown away, one might say: a valuable life, too."

Mary said, quietly: "He wouldn't have thought so; he was merely doing his job. And all the doctors were the same. They just went on operating . . . they had to; and my father used to say, it was a case of--the hospital *may* be hit whereas he *knew* he could save a patient's life, given the chance and if they could hold out long enough."

"Yes." Mrs. Taplow sighed. "He was a brave man, Mary, and you must, I'm sure, feel very proud of him. Anyway--thank God, those dreadful days are over; and you . . . I always think of you, now, as one of the happiest women in the world."

Mary flushed but her eyes were a little misty. She said: "I should be; I have everything in life to make me so," thinking of Henry--how she had kept his love, and what a wonderful husband he was: then of the children and her lovely home, feeling both grateful and humble all at once, because she had been given so much.

Sir Walter Ringross came up then, and stopped at their table to have a word with them. Apparently

Mary's supposition was correct; they had come down for a few days' hunting, and hounds were meeting to-morrow at his house. He said: "What about Viola? Will she be out?" and added: "By the way, who is this Jim Olivet everyone's talking about? He and Viola were 'walking' hounds in the three-acre field, when Johnny and I passed just now. I should say he'd got foreign blood in him; swarthy, you know, and a little moustache. Looks a bit of a Dago to me."

Mrs. Taplow laughed. "That's positively ridiculous, Walter. You think, just because the poor man's dark, he's an undesirable character."

"But my dear Carrie, I don't; I never said such a thing. Why", Sir Walter asked, plaintively, "do women always jump to conclusions, and misinterpret the meaning of our words? Will anyone tell me that?"

"No," said Mary. "for the simple reason we haven't time; also it would involve us in a lengthy and wordy argument, which is the last thing I'd want to have with you, Walter."

"Yes, indeed," Mrs. Taplow agreed. "He'd wipe the floor with us, Mary, and we should be brow-beaten like those unfortunate creatures in the witness-box. We might even end up by having to apologize, and that, thank God, is something I've never as yet done to any man." She added, inconsequently: "Alice, see if you can find my shoe, darling. I kicked them off to rest my feet and one must have strayed over to your side of the table."

Johnny Ringross, however, obeying the instincts which came as naturally to him as the air he breathed, was down on his knees before Alice could move off her chair; and having retrieved the shoe, he handed it to Mrs. Taplow with no outward signs of his extreme

embarrassment except for a slightly heightened colour and tightening of the lips: although he told his mother, afterwards, that he'd felt the most priceless ass, groveling about on the floor with all the Oakbridge cads gaping at him; added to which, the knees of his best uniform trousers were covered in dust.

Meanwhile, it had penetrated to Sir Walter that Mrs. Taplow was tired, so he offered to drive her home. "You, too, Mary. I'm using the Bentley today and there's bags of room for us all."

But Mary refused, saying, quite truthfully, that she would prefer to walk, although it wasn't her real reason for turning Sir Walter's offer down. Having evaded the questions about Jim Olivet, she was afraid to run the risk of being in his company, since Sir Walter was almost certain to bring the subject up again, and ask whether Viola and the Dago fellow were intimate friends. Realizing her own dislike of Jim Olivet, and how greatly she distrusted him, Mary knew, that whatever answer she gave would sound lame and unconvincing. It might even arouse suspicion in Sir Walter's legal mind, so the most sensible thing to do was to walk home alone and avoid having awkward questions put to her.

The knowledge, however, that Viola and the wretched man were out together and probably still walking around the three-acre field, worried Mary, and she decided to tell her daughter it mustn't happen again. But on entering the hall, she saw Viola lying full-length in front of the wood fire, with her elbows pressed into the sheepskin rug and her straight little nose buried, as the saying goes, in the glossy pages of a magazine. And the relief was so great that Mary exclaimed: "Oh! there you are, darling," and Viola, lost

to the world, murmured: "Hm . . . what?" Then, becoming aware of her mother's presence, added: "Mummy, it says here, that to keep the contour lines, whatever those are, you should exercise your face and neck. And they give a diagram of a woman with the most awful double chin." Viola felt her own. "I wonder if I ought to start doing it. What d'you think, Mummy? I'd simply hate to go about looking like a bloodhound. You know how their jowls hang down."

"Yes, darling; but don't worry; you won't . . . not just yet awhile. But if I should see the slightest signs of your getting what I believe beauty specialists call 'slackening of the tissues', I'll tell you immediately."

"You will? Promise . . . faithfully; on your honour?" Viola threw the magazine aside and sat up hugging her knees; and it was then Mary realized how unwise it would be to suggest or even hint, that Jim Olivet might expect and ask more than friendship of a girl, and by doing so, give the child ideas which in all probability would never have entered her innocent head.

So she said: "It must be very nearly lunch-time. I stayed gossiping at The Mandarin Café with Mrs. Taplow and Alice; and Sir Walter joined us. Johnny's home on leave."

"Yes, I saw them. They passed Jim and me in the car. We shouted and waved, but they turned up their toffee noses at us."

"Viola, darling! What an expression!"

"Sorry. I've heard Rick use it. Anyway—I left Jim 'walking' hounds. We only took a few out and it wasn't frightfully exciting, so I came home. And I shan't be hunting tomorrow."

"No? Sir Walter hoped you would. They're meeting at The Court."

"I know; but I don't particularly want to go. And I'm taking you to the pictures instead. Actually," Viola started to laugh, "Jim suggested coming with us . . . it's all right; he isn't; don't you look like that, Mummy. I managed to fend him off. I knew you'd be furious if he tagged along."

"You're perfectly right; I should," Mary said, forcibly.

"And Viola, darling, promise me . . ."

"Yes, yes, I promise! I know exactly what you're going to say but there's no need. And to be quite honest, it was only because Jim asked me to go to the 'flicks' with him tomorrow afternoon that I said I was taking my mamma." With that, Viola picked herself up and ran out of the room.

2

Mary had just finished dinner and gone into the drawing-room when the telephone rang, and she guessed it was Colin at the other end, even before lifting the receiver and hearing a voice say. "Are you Oakbridge 264? I have a call for you. Hold the line, please." Then: "Go ahead, Maidstone; you're through."

Her brother-in-law said: "Is that Mary? It's Colin here. How are you, my darling girl?"

"Quite well, Colin. And you?"

"Fair to middling; which, as you should know, is the Kentish man's term for damned awful!"

"I'm sorry, Colin. I hope there's nothing wrong. I mean—has life got on top of you, or what?"

Colin's laugh which was peculiarly his own came over the wire—ironic, slightly defiant, and without any

real amusement in it at all. "Life, my dear, is as usual. And that, being interpreted, means, I'm still here—stuck in a little provincial town, acting as an assistant to its Surveyor, who, needless to say, picks my brains and leaves most of the work to me. I have never erected castles in the air," Colin went on, "but I certainly had dreams of designing bridges, and building giant dams to stay the course of mighty rivers in countries on the other side of the world. After all, engineering is my job; but if one's wife refuses to leave England, what can a man do except give in gracefully?"

"Yes; I know, Colin. Only Primrose has her point of view. She isn't really strong enough to live in the sort of places you're talking about, is she?"

"No; nor should I ask or expect it of her. I could have gone on my own, though; but, there again, Primrose refuses to be left by herself."

Mary, having heard all this many times before, changed the conversation by asking: "How's Billy?"

"Billy? Oh, he's coming along. He had his fifth birthday last week. But, of course, you know that, since you sent him a wonderful Hornby train, which, incidentally, delighted his heart. He plays with it all day."

"I'm so glad. Billy is a dear little boy. We're all terribly fond of him."

"He's a very self-contained little boy; and extraordinarily plain. Or am I an extraordinary father to think that of my own child?"

"I don't know," said Mary, beginning to feel a little impatient. She asked then: "What were you really ringing up about, Colin? We needn't waste time. And where are you? At home?"

"No; I'm speaking from a call box in Maidstone. And, Mary—I shall probably need another six minutes,

perhaps more, so may I reverse the charge for those?"

"Yes; of course. We've had three minutes already. There go the pips. Do get on, Colin."

"All right, all right. Wait—don't cut us off."

"Are you accepting these calls, Oakbridge 264," an impersonal voice inquired, and Mary's "Yes" brought Colin on the line again. He said: "Look, Mary, I know it's asking a favour, but may I borrow your flat in Town for a couple of weeks? That is, if you're not using it yourself."

"Borrow our flat! What on earth . . . oh, you mean stay there, I suppose?"

"Well, that was the idea. I have a fortnight's holiday due to me, starting from Monday next, and I should like to spend it in London. But, quite frankly, Mary, I can't afford to stay at an hotel for two weeks; so it will be a tremendous help to have your flat. I shall probably get my meals out: In any case, I can cook, and look after myself."

"You mean . . ." Mary hesitated. "I don't understand, Colin. Won't Primrose be with you?"

"No; she hates London. She really does, Mary. You need not worry. Primrose is quite pleased for me to go off and enjoy myself—she said so—and would far rather be left at home with Billy. Now do you understand?"

"What? Oh, yes; of course. Well, I expect it will be all right. We shan't be using the flat, at least, not until May, when Viola and I might come up for a few days."

"You're sure?" There was, Mary thought, a definite note of anxiety in Colin's voice, but she put this down to his fear of inconveniencing Henry and herself; especially as he hastened to add: "It would be dreadful if you turned up suddenly and unexpectedly, and had to wait on your own doorstep until I came back to let

you in. We mustn't risk that happening, Mary. I should feel so ashamed."

"Don't worry; it won't. For one thing, Henry can't possibly get away; and there's nothing, at the moment, to bring me to Town."

"Good! Then we're all set. And how do I get in, Mary? What about keys?"

"I'll post one on to you. The porter has his own, of course, for use in an emergency. We'll write to him and explain that we are lending you the flat. And, Colin—I'm sorry, but I shall have to mention this to Henry. I mean, though I know he'll say yes, I shouldn't like to make any definite arrangement, without asking him first."

There was a little silence; then Colin said: "Do you always tell Henry everything, Mary?"

"Yes; always."

"Really! How very commendable. And what about Henry? Does he never keep anything from you?"

"I don't imagine so. Why should he?"

"No reason at all, my dear, unless he had something to hide; then he'd probably lie to you, like a great many other men."

"I'm not worried." Mary's voice, though gentle, was assured. "And you're just being contrary, Colin, and trying to take a rise out of me."

"But I'm not: I'm thinking what an unusual couple you and Henry are; and also feeling a little envious, of your touching faith and belief in each other. However—yes, by all means ask Henry's permission. I wouldn't for the world make trouble between you."

Mary laughed. "I doubt if you or anyone could do that. And please, Colin, don't be offended. It's so silly. And I've told you—Henry will lend you the flat with

pleasure; though he probably won't even remember he has, or that you're in it, with all he's got to think about. Anyway—I'll hang up now, Colin, unless you'd like to speak to Mother. I can switch the phone up to her room if you would."

"No; I won't bother. Actually, I'm getting rather cramped in this box; and there's a most ferocious-looking female outside, waiting to make a call. She's glaring in through the glass, and baring her teeth at me. How is my mamma, by the way?"

"The same as she always is, Colin. In pain most of the time, and terribly brave."

"I know. Well, perhaps I'll be seeing her and all of you before long. Or we might have another little outing together, Mary. D'you remember the day I took you to lunch at the Wellbourne, when you and Henry were in Town? Last January, wasn't it?"

"February, I think, though I'm not sure. Yes, it was, Colin, because Henry came up for that very important meeting. And you happened to meet us in Oxford Street, and offered to take me out to lunch."

"Yes; I remember, now. And we enjoyed ourselves so much we must certainly do it again. Oh! just one other thing, before I ring off. This porter you mentioned—I hope his duties don't include waking people up and bringing them early-morning tea, because I shouldn't want him to do that."

"You need not worry: he won't. I hope you're not expecting anything terribly luxurious, Colin. Ours isn't a service flat, you know. It's comfortable but quite impersonal. People come and go; and nobody takes the slightest notice of anyone else. As for the porter, Hadley, he'll take in your parcels and keep them in his little cubby-hole; and it's thanks to him that your

bath water will be hot. Otherwise, he's rather like a ghost—here one minute and gone the next; but a nice ghost and a very efficient one. I mean, he's there if you want him and not if you don't."

"Well, I only thought I'd ask. Actually, I intend to lie in of a morning. It's part of a holiday, and I should be most upset if Hadley or anyone else came banging on my door at eight o'clock. I'll say good-bye, then; and thank you, my very nice sister-in-law, for everything. I knew I could rely on you."

The line went dead, and Mary, replacing the receiver, made a face at it, saying to herself: "Of course I'm a 'very nice sister-in-law', because Colin knows he's got what he wants. I wonder how he would have reacted if I'd refused, right away, to lend him the flat! Not that I could have, possibly. After all, the place is shut up, and may as well be used as not. I've no doubt, being Colin, he is short of money, and I dare say the poor boy does need a holiday; so, if we can save him the expense of an hotel, then we certainly must."

Some years ago, Henry had taken over this flat in Sloane Avenue, with the vague idea that it would be useful to have a place of their own in which to stay, when business or pleasure took them to Town; and though this seldom happened, and the flat more often than not was unoccupied, he and Mary decided they would be wise to keep it on, especially now that the children had left school and reached the age to want, or rather demand, a certain amount of entertainment and gaiety. Also, if, as they hoped, Roderick continued to study law, and followed up his early ambition of becoming a barrister, it would solve the problem of where he was to live: always an anxiety for a mother,

who, naturally, wants to be sure that her son is well and comfortably housed.

Sitting by the fire, waiting for Henry, Mary found her thoughts wandering from one thing to another—idly, as thoughts will if not controlled: first on Viola and her friendship with Jim Olivet; then on Roderick . . . only one more day and she would see him again; and lastly on her sister-in-law, Primrose, Colin's wife, wondering if it were true that she didn't really mind being left at home with Billy, while he went off and enjoyed himself. Colin might say so, but Mary had her doubts. It wasn't as though Primrose could visit friends, or spend a week in Paris which was what she usually did herself, when Henry went off on a fishing holiday, or to shoot with other men. Poor Primrose had very few friends; and certainly not enough money to fly over to Paris, just by way of a change. It meant that she must stay in the dull little town, a few miles out of Maidstone, where they lived; and since her whole life was centred on Colin, she would probably feel lonely and depressed, and be counting the days to his return.

"Unless", Mary thought, getting up and putting her knitting back in its bag, "we ask her to stay with us. I think, perhaps, we should, though she mightn't want to come, of course. Anyway—I'll suggest it to Henry; and if he agrees, I can write to Primrose, and tell Colin about the flat at the same time."

Chapter Three

IT was almost eleven o'clock when Henry arrived home, and Mary, knowing that he must have had a strenuous day, waited until the morning to tell him about Colin's telephone call, and the request he had made regarding their flat. Henry was in his dressing-room at the time, and called out: "I'll be with you, Mary. Just hold on a second," and appeared in the doorway knotting his tie. He said: "This doesn't surprise me. I mean, that Colin wanted something out of us. I don't believe my brother has ever rung up unless it were to ask a favour, and plead poverty as an excuse for doing so. I suppose he told you he was hard up, and couldn't afford to stay at an hotel?"

"Well, yes," Mary admitted. She waited a moment; then asked: "You don't really mind his having the flat, do you, Henry? After all, we're not using it; and . . ."

"And you'd think I was a selfish and most unnatural brother if I said no!" Henry laughed, and bent down to kiss the nape of Mary's neck, where her hair came down to a sleek and endearing little peak. "Of course I don't mind; and if I did, you would soon talk me round. You're a wheedlesome woman, and you know I never have been able to refuse you anything."

"Well," Mary said, demurely, "that's nice for me; useful, too. And now, do go away, darling. I shall

never get dressed if you will insist upon kissing me when I'm trying to make up my face."

"I wonder you bother with all that cream and stuff; especially as it just goes on to be taken off again."

"That's what you think, dear, but you're wrong." Mary put the lid on her powder bowl and got up from the dressing-stool, saying as she did so: "I'll write to Colin, then, and send him a key. And about Primrose — shall I ask her here for the two weeks or not, Henry?"

"Yes, certainly, if you wish to, darling. But she won't come; I'm positive of that. Primrose", said Henry, "is what my old nurse used to call a regular stick-in-the-mud. Nothing will get her away from Millsham. And Colin's right, you know. She won't mind his going off to London on his own, particularly as business is involved, and there's a chance of his landing a better job."

Mary's grey eyes widened. "But, Henry . . . Colin will be on holiday: he intends to enjoy himself. At least, that's what he said."

"Of course; he would, to you, and I've no doubt it's the truth; only he'll have to think up something else for Primrose, otherwise he might not get away with it. He will probably tell her that he has to see various V.I.P.'s, about God knows what, and she, as a devoted wife, will urge him on to advancement and a better position, with tears in her beautiful eyes, and hope in her foolish heart."

Mary said "Oh!" and remained silent, until Henry, who had gone into the dressing-room to fetch his coat, came back again, when she asked: "D'you really think that, Henry?" and went on, a little hurriedly: "It's no business of mine, darling but I've sometimes wondered why Colin has never tried to get back to his proper job."

He told me last night that he'd always dreamed of building bridges, and working on dams; and it seems to me his brains are just running to waste."

"You're quite right, my dear, they are; but it's Colin's own fault, though he naturally blames everyone else; Primrose included, I'm sorry to say. He's had chance after chance, Mary, and thrown them all away. He just wouldn't stick at anything; and, as a result, ends up where he is—an assistant to the Surveyor of a local authority, and a small one at that."

There was a little silence; then Henry added: "We're all fond of Colin, of course; and you can't help feeling sorry for the poor chap, though there have been times when I could have cheerfully wrung his neck. As for mother, I imagine she often feels furious with Colin, but the angrier she is the more fervently she prays for him. So, if my brother ever becomes an exemplary character we shall know who is responsible and whom we are to thank."

Upon which, Henry opened the door for Mary and followed her down the stairs, deciding in his own mind that he would write his brother a cheque for . . . well, it had better be twenty pounds, or perhaps twenty-five; money didn't go far, these days; and blood was thicker than water—all that sort of thing, you know; and the only excuse for having plenty of money was to give some of it away.

Mary, too, planned to get her letter off to Colin by the midday post, and also send a warm invitation to Primrose to come and stay with them. And in due course, as Henry had predicted, the invitation was refused; penned in Primrose's large, rather school-girlish handwriting, with several words underlined to emphasize her appreciation of their kindness and

thought. She ended the letter by saying: "We are so grateful to you for lending your flat. Because, as I expect you know, Colin will be interviewing the heads of some of the most *important* engineering firms in the world, and it's a *tremendous* help to be able to give them a good address, like Sloane Avenue. They take a *lot* of notice of where people live."

Having read the letter through, Mary passed it over to Henry, pointing out the last paragraph with an expressive gesture of her hand, and Henry, scanning the pages, then folding them up, said: "You see—I was right, wasn't I? But Colin really has surpassed himself this time, with his—'most important engineering firms in the world'! However, there it is, and he has at least made Primrose feel quite happy, which is something, I suppose."

"I wonder"—Mary spoke tentatively—"whether we ought to tell her the truth, Henry? Discreetly, of course; or perhaps just give her a hint, that Colin is actually going on a holiday, and has every intention of enjoying himself."

"No; certainly not. It's their own affair, darling, and we can't possibly interfere. It would do more harm than good. Besides, Colin probably will go after a job, when he's in Town. He'll rake up somebody to interview, if only to ease his conscience, and make him feel less of a heel. Because Colin doesn't normally lie, you know. I mean, he twists things around, but there's always a modicum of truth in what he says; and as regards this particular case, I've no doubt he's worked it all out, and thinks he is doing right and acting for the best."

"Well," said Mary, "he must have got an odd kind of mind, or a distorted sense of right and wrong. I'm

not sure which; both, perhaps. I know there's no harm in what he's doing, Henry, but a man ought not to deceive his wife, even in little things. It doesn't make for happiness."

Henry laughed. "You're an idealist, darling, where marriage is concerned; but it isn't everyone who can live up to an ideal. Have you ever thought of that?"

"No; never," said Mary, and after a moment, added: "Did I sound smug, Henry? Would you say I was hard?"

"No, darling. Anything but that; only being a woman of high principles, you naturally expect others, to have the same standards as yourself; not realizing, perhaps, that some people find it extremely hard to be good; or shall we say, some find it easier than others to keep straight and live decent, orderly lives."

"Yes; I see now what you mean." Mary sighed. "I must try to be a little more tolerant, Henry; and you're quite right to lecture me. I had no business, either, to speak of Colin as I did. I'm sorry, dear, so please forget it was ever said." Mary looked at her watch. "Henry! the time! D'you realize it's nearly half-past ten?"

"Yes; don't worry. I'm just going. And you might tell Rick," said Henry, bending down to kiss her good-bye, "that I'll do my best to get back this afternoon, to play a round of golf with him."

"I will; he'll be terribly pleased," said Mary; and knowing that her mother-in-law would like to read Primrose's letter, she put it in her bag and went upstairs.

Roderick, who had now returned home, was in Mrs. Delair's room; Viola also, and they were both lying out on the floor, reading the paper together and arguing over the political situation. Upon hearing that his aunt

wasn't coming to stay after all, he said: "Well, to be quite honest, Mum, I'm glad. It isn't that I dislike Aunt Primrose, though she is a bit of a 'drip', only I haven't got many more days, and a visitor in the house does rather hamper one."

"I don't agree," said Viola. "It's much jollier with people around. I'd like to cram this house and have dances every night. D'you think we could, Mummy? Would you mind--in the Easter holidays, perhaps?"

"What a ghastly idea!" Rick looked horrified. "You won't let her, will you, Mum?" He turned on his twin. "And since when have you been so fond of the human race? I thought you only consorted with horses and dogs. Actually, you'll have to be careful, my child. You're growing awfully like a horse, yourself. Isn't she, Mum?"

"Well, I don't see any sign of it as yet," said Mary; while Mrs. Delair put in: "I've met women so 'horsey'-looking that one expected them to neigh; but I hope to heaven Viola will never come to that state."

"Another thing," Rick went on, "they usually wear the most appalling clothes: breeches, or men's slacks, and open-necked shirts. It must be awful to have one's female relations going around looking such guys."

"Which means, I suppose, you're grateful for the women you've got. And so you jolly well ought to be! How about when we came up for May Week, last year?" Viola demanded. "Didn't Mummy and I do you credit, then?"

"Mums did," said Rick, with the unconscious cruelty of youth. "She looked marvellous at our College Ball, and practically all my friends fell in love with her, but they regarded you, of course, as just a silly schoolgirl; I imagine, because your legs were fat."

"Rick, you beast! I've never had fat legs . . . never in my life. I couldn't have borne it. . . . I should have gone and drowned myself. Anyway, take a look at them now."

"Hm; yes, I'll pass those." Rick eyed his sister's long, and undeniably lovely legs with a judicial pursing of his lips. "They're certainly better than they were. And if we're going into Oakbridge, let's get started. I haven't the time to hang about here all day. Shall we walk or bus?"

"Walk, of course." Viola scrambled up from the floor, and they rushed out of the room, banging the door and with Mary calling after them: "Daddy is coming back this afternoon to play golf, Rick, so don't be late for lunch." Then she sat down in a chair by the window and shook her head. "I don't know, Mother. Would you say that those two were greatly attached to each other? It's a common belief that twins are very close; but you only have to meet mine to prove how untrue it is."

Mrs. Delair said: "You can't expect anything else, my dear—not at this stage of their lives. Viola, for instance, is far more advanced and older in mind than Rick, because girls grow up much quicker than boys. And Rick, of course, is at the age to regard enthusiasm as rather ill bred. I've no doubt he prides himself on his detachment towards people, plays and the arts—everything, in fact, except sport. Apparently it's permitted to get quite worked up over cricket, and whether we win the Test or an international Rugby match."

"And I suppose", Mary said with a smile, "his attitude annoys my poor Viola, who throws herself heart and soul into everything, and is as ready to enthuse

over one of Father Cleever's parish socials as a Hunt Ball. It's amazing really, Mother, how entirely different they are in temperament."

"I'm not so sure there is all that difference, Mary; and Rick will get over his silly phase. Meanwhile, for your comfort, they're devoted to each other at heart. Viola thinks the world of Rick, and he is intensely proud of her. I should like to see Rick in action, if anyone ran his sister down, or did something to cause her unhappiness."

"Yes; I imagine he would be most belligerent; even though he does say that she resembles a horse. And it's certainly a relief to know that Viola has a brother to tilt lances in her defence, if and when it becomes necessary."

2

Mary had spoken merely in jest, but she recalled her mother-in-law's words when, a few days later, Rick, looking somewhat perturbed, came into the drawing-room and asked, abruptly: "Mum, who is this chap, Jim Olivet? Has he been here long?"

"No, dear; only about six months, I think. Why?"

"Oh, nothing. Viola and I met him in Oakbridge the other morning, and it struck me they knew each other pretty well, so I wondered. Actually, I didn't like him very much. He seemed an absolute outsider—a bit of a stinker. I hope to goodness she isn't in love with him. I should hate to have the Olivet for a brother-in-law."

"You won't. I can promise you that. He's already married; and to a very charming girl, so I'm told."

"Oh, I see. Then he can't very well marry Viola; not even if his wife got a divorce. It wouldn't let him out, would it, or make things any easier?"

"Certainly not. As a Catholic, Viola couldn't marry a divorced man. You know that, Rick, so why ask? In any case, darling, if Mr. Olivet were free, I'm quite sure nothing would induce her to marry him."

Rick said: "I should hope not!" Then added: "All the same, Mum, it mightn't be a bad idea to let Father in on this, and get him to tell the Olivet, politely of course, to sheer off. You see, Viola may not be able to stop herself falling in love with the chap; if they're always around together, I mean. Girls are such asses over things like that; and . . . well, after all she is my sister, and I'd hate her to be hurt."

"I know, dear; and I'm terribly glad you feel as you do." Mary spoke with pride, and she was thinking that Rick's grandmother was right in saying he would be up in arms if anything threatened his sister's happiness, but her other remarks regarding his detachment and apparent lack of interest in other people's affairs didn't quite fit in, at least not where the family were concerned. Because, he was obviously straining at the leash, to join forces with his father, and settle Mr. Olivet once and for all, and Mary had no intention of allowing that to happen.

So she said: "You must promise me not to say a word about this to Daddy, Rick. We don't want to bother him; besides, there's no need. I admit, I was a little worried at first, but I realize now that Viola and Mr. Olivet are just good friends. They hunt, and sometimes 'walk' hounds together, and have the same interests; and I'm quite sure he thinks of her as a child, and treats Viola as he might a daughter of his own."

Rick, who was no fool, and knew more about life than his mother ever imagined, said: "Perhaps you're right," deciding, however, since he'd noticed that Mr. Olivet's expression when he looked at Viola was anything but fatherly, to keep an eye both on her and the gentleman in question himself.

There was a little silence, while Rick scowled, deep in thought. He said at last: "Quite a lot of people get divorced, don't they, Mum?"

"Yes, Rick; unfortunately." Mary's voice was gentle.

"The paper gave how many marriages were dissolved last year. I can't remember how many it was. Hundreds, I think. It must . . ." He searched for words; "It must be pretty rotten to know that your father and mother want to be shot of each other. Gregson—he's a friend of mine, we're on the same staircase—his parents were divorced. He doesn't mind so much now he's grown up, but he said it was beastly at the time, because he liked them both—both his parents, I mean, and he had to live with his mother."

"If she were given the custody of the child, she must have been the innocent party," said Mary. "Unless your friend was very young. Judges will sometimes order the child to remain with its mother, if they are under a certain age."

"Greg was about nine, I think. And the Court said he must spend part of the holidays with his father, which, of course, was darned uncomfortable, Mum; because, you see, he'd married this other woman, and Gregson hated her. He said she'd barged in and caused all the trouble. She sounds rather a bit . . . ; I mean, she doesn't sound very nice; and poor old Greg had a perfectly ghastly time of it, what with her and everything."

"I can imagine he did," Mary said feelingly. "It's a sad story, dear, but true of so many, I'm afraid. And Rick, darling—I don't really like discussing divorce, so, if you feel you must, I suggest you talk to Daddy instead of me."

"But I don't want to, Mum; not one little bit. I know I told you about Gregson; otherwise divorce leaves me cold. It doesn't concern us. I mean, it isn't as though a divorce could ever happen in our family."

"No, darling; it's quite impossible." Mary smiled. Then, not so much to Rick but speaking her thoughts aloud, she added: "Whatever we have to face, it won't be that, thank God."

When Rick had left the room, Mary unlatched the long casement windows and strolled out to the garden where gay tulips and golden daffodils made a blaze of colour, and the honey-sweet smell of wallflowers scented the air. A bed, massed with polyanthus, flaunted its own special beauty in front of her eyes, and stopping to look down at them, Mary wondered yet again why she, who deserved so little, should have been given so much. Because, she did in very truth possess everything: perfect health, money, a beautiful home; children of whom she could feel proud, and a husband she adored.

But apart from all this, Mary knew her deep content and happiness lay in the fact that she and Henry trusted each other; and remembering Rick's clear eyes, when he spoke just now about there never being a divorce in their family, she thought: "Thank God our children are safe from that. If Henry and I lost everything, we could still give them security. They'll always have us. Supposing—Rick had looked at me, and I'd been ashamed to meet his eyes? What do women feel,

and how do men behave, when they have something to hide? Why is it that so many marriages go wrong? We read of cases in the papers, and they give all the evidence, but we don't really know the truth, or who is at fault. I imagine, more often than not, it's a third person coming between husband and wife. And a woman who does that", Mary said aloud, stooping down to break off a withered flower, "deserves to be whipped."

Returning to the house, and opening the drawing-room window, she found Father Cleever there, standing with his back to the fire, and Viola pouring sherry into a glass. Mary said: "I had no idea you were here, Father. I'm so sorry. Have you been waiting long? Why didn't you call me, Viola?"

"Tut-tut, Mummy. I shouted all over the house. Then Hetty said you'd gone out, so I thought I'd better entertain Father, and offer him a drink."

"I'm glad you did, dear. But perhaps Father Cleever doesn't like sherry, and would prefer something else."

"No; this is fine, thank you, Mrs. Delair. I hope it isn't an inconvenient time to call, but I wanted to see you rather urgently."

"And we're delighted to see you, Father. Do sit down. Viola, darling, there are some cigarettes in that box on the table . . . at least, I hope so, but they have a habit of disappearing when Rick is at home."

Father Cleever said: "We met just now, down in the village. Rick told me you would probably be here, so that's why I came along."

"And I suppose you walked all the way from Oakbridge?"

Mary shook her head as Father Cleever admitted that he had. "With a scattered parish like this, Father,

you ought to have a car; and I think it's up to the parishioners to give you one."

Father Cleever laughed. "I can't quite see them doing that, generous though they are. And I don't really mind walking. In fact, I rather enjoy it; and I'd much sooner walk than take a bus."

Mary thought that this might well be true, since Father Cleever was young; and, in spite of being as thin as a rail, looked fit enough to cope with anything. He had been parish priest of the little Oakbridge church since last October, but even in so short a time, his people had become greatly attached to him, because, apart from being their priest, and there to look after them, Father Cleever, amongst other qualities, possessed that rare and endearing one of simplicity, and had, besides, an abounding charity, though he could, on occasions and when necessary, reprove and administer correction in words which winged their way like arrows, swift and unglancing, straight into the hearts of his listeners. He sat, now, quietly at ease, drinking sherry and smoking a cigarette with apparent enjoyment, but in actual fact, he liked neither, and would have preferred a pipe and a glass of Somerset cider to anything else.

He said then, with his usual directness: "I've really come to see you about Mike Clonnel, Mrs. Delair. I expect you've heard that he's in trouble. Unfortunately, the case was reported in the *Oakbridge Standard*, so everyone knows, I'm sorry to say."

"Well, I must be the one exception," said Mary. "I hardly ever read our local paper, I'm afraid. What has Mike been doing? Anything very terrible?"

"From our point of view, yes; at least, if not terrible, it's bad enough. Actually, Mike helped himself to what

didn't belong to him; to put it bluntly, he stole, and has therefore, quite justly, been sent to prison. He was charged with stealing two articles of clothing from the Oakbridge Emporium, and the magistrates took a dim view of his conduct. I don't know much about the law, or how it works," Father Cleever added, reaching for an ash-tray and stubbing out his cigarette. "They might perhaps have let him off with a fine, but he wouldn't have had the money to pay; so, I imagine they gave him the minimum sentence and left it at that."

Distressed, Mary said: "I'm dreadfully sorry. I had no idea this had happened. Mike of all people. He always seemed such a steady, hard-working man. What will his poor wife do, Father; and all those little children? They've got— is it seven or eight?"

"Seven, counting the baby which has just arrived. They'll need help, of course, and I'm getting up a fund, hoping to gather in enough to keep them going until Mike comes out of gaol. I managed to fix things about his job . . . they'll take him back, so that's all right. Mr. Cantley, the manager of the quarries, thinks a lot of Mike. Meanwhile, I want money, Mrs. Delair. I'm asking everyone in the parish to give me something. I don't mind how little it is."

"You mustn't tell people that, Father; otherwise you'll be fobbed off with shillings and sixpences." Mary smiled; then added: "I'd better give you my subscription now, whilst you're here."

She crossed the room and sat down at her writing desk, and there was silence except for the murmuring fire, and the clear notes of a blackbird and thrush coming from the garden, as she made out the cheque.

Viola, at her mother's elbow, whispered urgently:

"You'll give a nice lot, won't you, Mummy? And add some on for Daddy. You can tell him afterwards."

To which Mary returned an admonishing: "Don't talk to me while I'm doing this, darling. I shall only make a mistake and put the wrong date, if you do." She folded the cheque and came back to Father Cleever, putting it into his hand.

He said: "Thank you very much, Mrs. Delair. I'm most grateful," quite simply and with nothing abject or apologetic in his manner and tone of voice; nor, Mary knew, would there have been, even if he had seen the amount on her cheque, because he begged unashamedly for his poor; but she read in the one swift glance he gave her how deeply grateful he was.

Viola said, a little shyly: "I can't give you anything now, Father; as usual, I'm broke; but I'll borrow from Daddy, and bring it along to the presbytery. And do tell us, before you go; what Mike stole, and why? He must have wanted the things awfully badly."

"He did," said Father Cleever. "Actually, the story has a ring of O. Henry about it; he would have written the whole thing up beautifully. You remember that the quarry people gave a party for their employees' children; a few weeks ago? Well, Mike's Rosie—she's his eldest, about fourteen, I believe, managed to wangle an invitation, though the party was really meant for the younger children. Anyway—the Clonnells were very excited and pleased; the sad part of it was, Rosie had nothing to wear. She'd set her heart on, and said she must have a real party frock; so Mike, since he couldn't afford to buy her one, went into the Emporium and helped himself. He chose the rush hour, and took a dress off its hanger and stuffed it under his coat. Then, not content with that, he did the same thing with a pair

of shoes. I understand the frock was rather an elaborate affair, and he took a lot of trouble to find shoes to match. Rosie told me, with the tears streaming down her face, that they were gold brocade sandals, and had sling heels, whatever that might mean."

"Oh!" said Viola. Her young face was clouded, because she couldn't help thinking of the dozens of pairs of shoes, standing in orderly rows, up in her bedroom, and amongst them lovely and expensive evening sandals, almost new and hardly ever worn: while Mary, even more distressed, said:

"If only I'd known, Father! Why didn't Mrs. Clonnel come to me? I would have given Rosie a dress; I mean a new one—she could have chosen it herself. Now we can't do anything."

Chapter Four

THERE was another silence; then Father Cleever said gently: "I wouldn't say that, because already you have done quite a lot. And another thing—the Clonnells would never ask a favour of anyone. They're much too proud. I'm afraid . . ." he hesitated; then went on. "You know, pride is really at the bottom of all this trouble. Mike couldn't bear the thought of Rosie going to the party in a shabby frock, because he knew she'd feel humiliated. So what does he do? Steals and lands himself in gaol, which, of course, will bring a far greater humiliation on Rosie, and the rest of his family, than if she'd turned up in rags and nothing on her feet."

"I suppose," Mary asked, "Mike realizes that, now?"

"I don't imagine so; and naturally, he can't be expected to appreciate the bitter, almost cruel irony of the whole affair. All Mike says is, 'I did it for the best' and I'm quite sure he honestly believes that. But how he thought he'd ever get away with it, I wouldn't know."

"He probably didn't stop to think, and that was the trouble," said Viola. "Poor Mike! I do hope people won't be beastly to him when he comes back. D'you imagine they will, Father?"

"I don't know, Viola; quite likely, especially those who are least entitled to throw stones. They're always

ready to hurl bricks, and, as a rule, their aim is exceptionally good." Father Cleever held out his hand to Mary. "I shall have to be going, Mrs. Delair. Thank you again for your generosity and help. Perhaps you'll call down and see Mrs. Clonnel one day?"

"Yes; of course, Father; if you're quite sure she would like to see me."

"She won't mind you," Father Cleever said, with a faint accent on the last word, which, upon thinking it over after he'd gone, was, Mary decided, kind of him though rather strange. Because, Father Cleever couldn't really know whether she was the type of person to visit an unhappy woman whose husband was in gaol. Or did he? It seemed so, and probably was so, since Father Cleever wouldn't be so tactless as to send somebody along who might, perhaps, by their manner and speech, make poor Kitty Clonnel feel even more ashamed, and drive her to the depths of despair.

Henry, when asked his opinion, said with an amused smile: "Father Cleever is right. You're just the person to visit people in trouble, whether it be of the body, soul or mind." And this, coming from Henry, sounded to Mary stranger still.

She said: "But why, darling? You told me, only the other day, that I was intolerant; in which case, if it were true, I should take the opportunity of rubbing it into Mrs. Clonnel that Mike had committed a grievous wrong, and deserved to suffer for his sins."

"I didn't say you were intolerant. I called you an idealist, which is a vastly different thing. And I'm perfectly certain," said Henry, "that if Mike had gone off with another woman, you wouldn't feel very kindly disposed towards him, or be quite so ready to forgive."

"I don't expect I should. But you can't compare the

two, Henry. It's ridiculous; infidelity and stealing are totally different. They're not in the same category."

Henry, since he seemed to be getting the worst of it, said, still with an amused smile on his lips, that he must get some letters written in time for the early post, and went off, leaving Mary to start on her first job of the day, which was, invariably, tidying up all Viola's muddles strewn about the breakfast-room, and putting them back in the places where they belonged.

Although she had "Cookie" in the kitchen, and Hetty's adequate help, Mary always found plenty to do about the house, especially when Rick was at home, because he made ceaseless demands, not only on her time but for all sorts of things. His whole wardrobe, apparently, needed overhauling and replenishing before going back to Cambridge, and she seemed to live in a perpetual whirl of taking suits to the cleaners and his shoes to be repaired, then ringing up to know why they hadn't been returned.

"Don't the fools realize that I *must* have them; that I'm going away on Friday?" Thus Rick in one of his states. Or: "I could do with three new shirts, Mum; and some pyjamas. Two pairs of mine got lost, somehow: In any case, they were practically in ribbons; and a leg was missing from one."

"A leg! But, Rick, why? I mean—what happened?"

"I don't know. They probably ripped it off at the laundry; or I may have caught the damned thing on a door. Quite likely. You're not angry with me, though, are you, Ma?" Rick put an affectionate arm around his mother's neck, and rubbed her cheek with his nose. The term "Ma", Mary knew, was one of endearment, because Rick only used it on the occasions of his arriving and leaving home, and when he was feeling

particularly loving towards her; so what could she say now but: "I ought to be furious, darling. I do wish you would try and look after your clothes. However—you must have some new pyjamas, of course; and shirts, I suppose. Only I'm not buying those without you, Rick. It's too much responsibility." To which Rick, even more affectionate, said: "Good old Ma! we'll go into Oakbridge this afternoon on a shopping binge. And", he added, handsomely, "as the car's in dock and it means a bus both ways, I'll stand you your fare."

But Oakbridge, it seemed, had nothing to offer in the way of shirts; or rather, nothing that Mary's fastidious son would wear. As each of them was brought out and laid on the counter by the sleekest and most obliging of all Naylor & Boone's sleek and obliging young men, Rick turned his eyes away as though unable to bear the sight of anything quite so horrible; and when Mary, in her innocence, said: "What about those with the blue and grey stripes? I think they're rather nice, don't you?" he whispered a shocked and reproachful "Mother!" And taking control of the situation, thanked the assistant politely but regretted having to leave the matter for today.

Outside the shop he said: "It's no good, Mum. We shan't get anything in this footling little town. Those shirts were perfectly ghastly. I wouldn't be seen dead in them!"

"But, Rick, why? They looked all right to me. You're just being fussy, darling."

"Fussy! Mum, don't you realize that all those horrors had their collars attached?" Rick uttered the last word as though it were obscene, and answered his mother's: "Well, surely that's quite a good idea. You wouldn't be nearly so likely to lose them if they didn't come off,"

with a despairing: "Mum, you're hopeless. You'll be suggesting, next, that I should wear a 'dicky' and a made-up bow." He added, firmly: "I shall buy the darned things in Cambridge; the shops there do at least cater for men who have some sense of decency and a little self-respect. So, if you'll give me the 'dough', Ma, I'll see to it when I get back."

Mary said resignedly: "Very well. All I hope is that you will remember and not go about in rags for the rest of the term. But I'm buying your pyjamas, Rick. We'll go along to Mr. Hobart. He won't stock rubbish; all he sells is of excellent quality." Rick agreed that old Hobart's things weren't too bad; so they turned back and cut into a side street where Mr. Hobart's shop had been standing for over two hundred years. It was small and very dark, with one diamond-paned bow window behind which were displayed a few socks and ties of subdued colours, and a headless dummy—or rather a torso—that was Mr. Hobart's pride and joy. Today it had been clothed in a snuff-coloured, Harris tweed hacking jacket of exceptional cut, needless to say, and a hunting stock. Occasionally Mr. Hobart broke out and put his treasure into a stiff shirt and tail coat, but not often; as he judged, quite rightly, that dinner jackets and "tails" really required trousers to show them off advantageously, and the torso, unfortunately, had no legs. Inside the shop there were shelves, crammed with bulky packages and little green boxes, reaching right to the ceiling which was so low Mr. Hobart could reach the top one easily just by putting up his hand. There was a faint smell of gas, old wood and woollen garments, mingled with and overlaid by the fragrant polish Mr. Hobart used on his shining and solid oak floor. He was serving two customers at once when Mary

and Rick came into the shop, but Mr. Hobart never kept anyone waiting. He flew about like a little india-rubber ball, being short and rotund, taking things out of boxes, whipping off string and spreading garments in front of people's eyes; then darting away to pull out a drawer, murmuring an assuring: "Just a moment, sir; I've got it. . . . I've got exactly what you require. The right size and correct colour. Tan, you said? No, I agree, sir. Beaver would be a shade too dark." So one could hardly wonder that Mr. Hobart's business was what is known as "a little gold-mine" and had been ever since his great-grandfather started it.

Seeing Mary, he said: "Good afternoon, madam. What may I do for you? Pyjamas . . . for this young gentleman? Certainly. Pray be seated. I'll just show you ^{what} ~~what~~ lines I have and you can be looking at them whilst I finish serving these gentlemen." He cocked a knowledgeable eye at Rick over his spectacles. "I should say large size not medium. You'll need the length "leg." And, within a second, eight pairs of pyjamas were laid out on the counter, all bearing the name of their renowned maker, and, as Mary knew just by feeling them, of the very highest quality. Meanwhile, Mr. Hobart had gone back to his other customers, and having finished with one was now unwrapping a parcel of woollen vests and long underpants for the inspection of a tall and very dark-skinned young African, who asked, a little anxiously, if they would be really warm. It was obvious that the English climate had nearly killed him, because he kept on repeating: "Wull . . . all-a wull is what I must have." And Mr. Hobart, not to be outdone, assured him in pidgin English, that the garments were indeed "all-a wull", and unshrinkable at that.

He then returned to Mary and Rick, who had picked out the pyjamas they liked and laid the rest aside. He was, of course, dismayed by Rick's refusal to have the parcel sent, but even more distressed when he said: "You don't keep shirts, do you, Mr. Hobart? I remember, the last time I came in, you told me you'd given up stocking them."

Mr. Hobart shook his head sorrowfully. "True, sir; I have. The fact is, the competition was too great. You see, sir, most of my customers get their shirts tailored; and the rest—well—they want a cheaper article than I care to sell, so I don't bother now. I'm sorry, Mr. Delair, sir; very sorry, but that's how it is."

And: "Queer old bird, isn't he?" Rick remarked as they walked back to the High Street. "I like his ancient shop, though. It's got definite atmosphere; and I remember your taking me there when I was about five, to buy a pair of grey shorts and a loathsome red jersey."

"Which you refused to wear, because Viola had one exactly like it and you were afraid of looking too much of a girl." Mary sighed. "Even then you made trouble and fussed over your clothes. Rick, darling, I think I must have some tea; I find shopping with you most terribly exhausting. And how about going to the pictures, afterwards? I don't know what's on . . . anyway, there'll be something."

"Yes, I know, Mum, but we aren't wasting our money—or rather yours, because I've only got enough to pay the bus fares home—on a tripe-ish film. Unless", he added, politely, "you're dead set on seeing a 'flick'. If so, I'll come with you, of course."

However, upon arriving at the Picture House, they found Rick's worst fears realized and decided to give it

a miss. He said: "There! What did I tell you? '*Child of the Underworld.*' You can imagine what that would be like. And the second feature's a Western. Mum, we can't! You don't want to go in, surely."

"Not if it's one of those with the galloping horses and men shooting each other. Actually, I can never understand a word they say or what they're doing; and I invariably get the hero and villains mixed up. I think you're right, dear. Come along. Let's go home."

So they went back to the Town Hall and just managed to squeeze into the Prior's Oak bus which was already filled to capacity. An enormously stout woman moved an inch to let Mary sit down, remarking cheerfully: "Room for a little one, dearie." While Rick, standing by the door, not only endured the pain of having his feet trampled on and people's elbows, not to mention their sticks and umbrellas, poked into his ribs, but suffered acute embarrassment from a lively and rather grubby baby who addressed him as "Dad-dad" and made frequent grabs at his hair.

They were both glad, therefore, when the journey came to an end; and walking up from the village, Rick put an arm around his mother's shoulders and marched her along to the tune of his whistling until they turned in at the gates of Little Court. Mary said then, quite suddenly: "Oh, Rick! I do wish you weren't going away. It's sad . . . this having to say good-bye."

"Never mind; cheer up, Mum. I'll be coming back. Meanwhile father's here to look after you." Rick grinned. "You'd feel a jolly sight worse if he went away, and left you alone for weeks on end."

And beyond a reproving: "You shouldn't compare, Rick," Mary had nothing to say, because she knew it was true.

Once Rick had returned to Cambridge, a kind of Elysian peace descended on everyone, although Mary always felt as if a hurricane had passed over the house, leaving chaos and destruction in its train, since she spent most of the following week tidying up after her son.

Things gradually settled down, however, and Mary got back to the normal routine of running her home, deciding one moment that they really ought to start the spring cleaning, then, weak-mindedly, putting it off to a later date, much to Hetty's relief, because she regarded spring cleaning as some people did marriage, as a necessary evil, and a thing not to be entered upon lightly, or without due thought.

With the warmer weather and signs of summer approaching, lawn mowers appeared in shoals, dragged out from wood sheds and garages, and everyone started to potter around their gardens, and talk boastfully of the marvellous roses they expected to have this year. Mary, because she was a real gardener and always pruned her roses drastically, said nothing, but just waited contentedly for them to bloom, which they would start to do, probably at the beginning of May, unless a frost and exceptionally cold weather set in. This was the time of year she really loved most. There were primroses starring the hedgerows, and white violets hiding themselves under damp green leaves in the woods. The whole countryside was scented and sweet.

Even Viola, who wasn't exactly a lover of nature, remarked with an appreciative sniff, that it smelt rather lovely and reminded her a bit of a beauty parlour. "Or the cosmetic counter at Harrods. You know, all those marvellous soaps and bath salts. They

come wafting out at you." She asked, then: "Are we going up to London in May, Mummy?"

"I don't really know, dear. Would you be terribly disappointed if we put our visit off for a while? I hate leaving the garden, just when everything looks so beautiful."

"No; I shouldn't care two hoots, Mummy." Viola flushed; then added, as she walked back to the house: "In fact, I'd rather stay at home, myself," which remark made Mary wonder what her daughter was up to now.

Viola's friendship with Jim Olivet seemed to have sizzled out; either he had come to his senses or, as Mary hoped, realized that he'd picked the wrong type of girl. Anyway— they saw very little of each other, now, so Viola wasn't choosing to remain at home on his account. On the other hand, she was seeing quite a lot of Tommy Fraser: hardly a day passed but what she went to his house, or Tommy came up to Little Court; and she had, on one or two occasions, Mary remembered, spoken of Tommy's bravery, and said, a little too casually, that what he needed was a wife to look after him.

Sighing, but comforting herself with the thought that if Viola pitied Tommy, as she obviously did, there was small chance of her ever falling in love with the poor boy, Mary walked round to the front door and into the hall, where Hetty was standing with a telegram in her hand.

She said: "This has just come, ma'am. I was bringing it out to you. Miss Viola read the message, and told the boy there'd be no answer, ma'am."

"Yes; that's quite all right, Hetty. I expect Mr. Roderick discovered he had left something behind."

But Viola, overhearing this, called over the banisters: "No; it's from Uncle Colin, Mummy. He's coming for a few nights and arriving on the six-fifteen."

"Oh, Viola! When? Today?"

"Yes."

"Oh," Mary said again; then reading the telegram, saw that it had been handed in at Victoria, so Colin was indeed on his way. Feeling pleased and knowing Henry would be glad to see his brother, she turned to Hetty and said: "Mr. Delair will go into the yellow room, Hetty. He likes it, because he slept there as a little boy. And Viola, darling, you might tell Cookie that Uncle Colin will be here in time for dinner. Meanwhile, I'll go and give Granny the news."

Mrs. Delair was lying in her invalid chair, which had been drawn up to the window; and hearing that her son would be arriving this evening, she said: "It isn't often Colin favours us with a visit, and I'm wondering, Mary, what's bringing him, now. And how can he leave his job? Is he still on holiday?"

"Oh, no; surely not. He only had a fortnight. Besides, Henry heard from him—last week, I think it was. He wrote, thanking us for the flat; and returned the key."

"I see. Then Colin is evidently back at work, and feeling the strain! So he decides to have a few days' rest in the country. Well," Mrs. Delair sighed, "I shall be glad to see him, Mary. Only—before he comes up to me, find out, if you can, whether he's got himself into some kind of jamb over money, and pass the information on to me. I may as well know the worst, and what amount I'm expected to put on his cheque."

Bending down to kiss her mother-in-law, Mary said gently: "It might not be money, darling; we don't even know that Colin is in any trouble at all; so try not to

worry, Mother. In any case, Henry wouldn't allow you to be bothered. He'll deal with the matter whatever it is; though I'm quite sure, myself, there's nothing behind this, and that Colin just feels he'd like a break, or thinks it would be rather nice to see us all again."

Mary spoke cheerfully because she really believed what she said; and was even more convinced that they had nothing to worry about, the moment her brother-in-law got out of the train, and came striding along the platform towards her, swinging a rolled umbrella, and carrying a small leather case in the other hand. Putting this down to enable him to raise his hat, he kissed her on both cheeks and said: "Mary, my darling girl! How wonderful it is to see your sweet face again. And how kind of you to come and meet me. I was just wondering whether there were any taxis to be had."

"Yes; a few. But the drivers don't like making the journey out to Prior's Oak. And they charge an awful lot. I'm glad you've come, Colin. How are you—and the family?"

"Not too bad. Primrose sent her love, so I'll hand it over before I forget." Colin looked around the station yard. "Is Henry here?"

"No; he's not back yet; and Viola's gone off on some ploy of her own, so I came alone. I'm afraid you won't see Rick, but otherwise you'll find everyone else at Little Court."

"Good!" said Colin. He settled himself in the seat by Mary, declining her offer to drive the car with a decided: "No thank you, Mary. Not in the country. For one thing, yokels have no road sense whatsoever; and your tortuous lanes would put years on me." He added: "Oakbridge hasn't altered much, I see, and these market towns are all alike. This"—he gestured

towards the street—"might be Millsham. God! how I loathe and detest small places, Mary! For Pete's sake drive quickly, darling, and let's get out of it."

Mary laughed. "Poor Colin! As bad as that! I can understand, now, why you chose to spend your holiday in London. And while I think of it—did you find everything all right at the flat? And Hadley, I hope"—she smiled—"refrained from bringing you early morning tea, and kept out of your way?"

"Hadley", Colin said, answering her smile with one of his own, "was just what you described him to be—a very nice, elderly ghost. And if the people in the other flats hadn't chosen to take their baths at something like one o'clock in the morning, when the sound of mighty waters filled my ears, and Niagara itself seemed to be rushing down the waste pipes, I wouldn't have known there was another tenant in the place. I don't know what they did with themselves all day; went out to jobs, perhaps, or stayed in their rooms, writing and painting masterpieces; but during the two weeks I was there I never once set eyes on them."

"Well," said Mary, "you just didn't happen to meet, that's all. And they're certainly not the type to come rushing out of their front doors, the moment they hear somebody on the stairs. Anyway—did you have a good time and enjoy yourself?"

Colin, still smiling, said: "Yes, I had a lovely time, thank you, Mary." Then went on, not as though he wished to change the subject, but quite casually: "The country looks very beautiful at this time of the year; and Prior's Oak is certainly a picturesque village. I'd forgotten how pretty it was. And—good lord! there are the little Queen Anne houses. I thought they'd been pulled down to make room for some hideous erection.

Does Mrs. Taplow still live at number one? And what's happened to old Maud Perry?"

"Nothing, Colin. I mean, she's just the same as ever, full of good works; rushing around and visiting the sick and needy. I always think Maud should have been a man. It does seem such a waste, because she would have made the most marvellous vicar. As it is, Mr. Austley says he doesn't know what he'd do without her."

Colin looked amused. "Maudie is one of those estimable women who are only missed when they're dead."

"And you, my dear, enjoy making those sort of cryptic remarks. When did you think that one up, Colin? Actually, I'd call Maud and women like her the salt of the earth, but I know you won't agree with me. Anyway—don't let's start arguing the second you are in."

"I never argue, Mary; it's much too exhausting and such an appalling waste of energy. I prefer to stick to my own point of view, and at the same time give in gracefully to the other person whoever he or she may be. It might, of course, make a difference," Colin went on, "if men, and women too, could argue a thing out and keep control of their tempers, but the average person finds it quite impossible. As G. K. Chesterton, of happy memory, once said or wrote: 'People generally quarrel because they cannot argue,' and to my mind . . ." He broke off suddenly. "Hold it, Mary. What does that female think she's doing, standing in the middle of the road and waving her arms at us?"

"She wants a lift; it's Viola," said Mary, slowing down, and added as she stopped the car and opened the door: "You timed that nicely, darling. Hop in; but what have you done with your bicycle?"

"I left it at Alice's house. Hello, Uncle Colin! How

are you?" Viola blew him a kiss and scrambled into the back seat.

"I guessed you'd be passing. Does anyone mind if I open a window? I'm absolutely baked."

"You look it," said Colin. "What, may we ask, has brought that flush to your cheeks?"

"Well, actually, Alice and I have been in Joe's kitchen. He's making a most marvellous fricassée of chicken for Tommy's dinner, and we wanted to stay and see how it was done."

Colin asked: "Is Tommy still going around?" and Viola, a little affronted, said: "Yes, of course he is. Why? Did you think the poor darling was dead? That isn't a very kind thing to say, Uncle Colin; and I'm sorry now I didn't stay and have dinner with Tommy. He asked us both . . . Alice and me . . . only I thought, as this was your first evening, I ought to be at home."

"I should have been deeply hurt and probably never got over it, had you stayed away," Colin said gravely; and Mary put in: "And I, most certainly, would have had something to say, so it's just as well you altered your mind, darling." She added: "And this three-some business of you, Alice and Tommy. Is it a new craze? You seem to be seeing rather a lot of each other lately; or do you hunt in couples, and leave either yourself, Alice or Tommy at home?"

"No; we gang up together, as a rule. If Tommy and I go for a walk or to the 'flicks', Alice comes along with us. We like having her; and they're quite good friends," Viola added, casually.

Mary said: "Oh, I see," and with their arrival at the house, and Henry coming out to greet his brother, the matter slipped from her mind and wasn't thought of again.

2

Colin hadn't been in the house five minutes before he said he must go up and see his mother, which, of course, was only natural and what one would expect; and although Mary, mindful of her promise, and painfully aware that she'd had no time to discover the state of her brother-in-law's finances, or what, if any, trouble he was in, tried her best to stop him, nothing she said did any good.

With an airy: "Shan't be long Mary; but Mamma would never forgive me if I kept her waiting," Colin ran up the stairs, and watching him, Mary comforted herself by thinking that even if he did spend money rather too freely and come on his family for help, Colin would never do anything *really* bad. He was, after all, a Delair and must, therefore, share some of Henry's characteristics, and have set himself certain standards by which to live. With regard to right and wrong, and if morals were in question, they would, as brothers and having the same background, think alike; though their temperaments and general make-up, Mary knew, were entirely different, which, no doubt, was why they didn't always see eye to eye, and, at times, disagreed so violently.

But tonight, seated at dinner, Colin seemed anxious to—not exactly placate—but please his brother, and looking at him across the table, Mary thought again what a dangerously attractive man he was. Apart from his looks, which were above the average, Colin possessed a magnetic charm, and had the power of making you feel you'd do anything on earth for him; a power,

as his mother always said, that he used quite unscrupulously, if he found whatever it was he wanted hard to obtain. He talked, now, throughout dinner, brilliantly, on different subjects, because Colin, for all his laziness, was a clever and brilliant man, and Mary could tell that Henry was enjoying the conversation, and pleased to see his brother again.

She said then: "What would you like to do after dinner, Colin? D'you care for Bridge? There are four of us; only I doubt whether our standard of play will come up to yours."

Henry said: "I'm quite sure it won't," with a smile for Viola, who agreed, cheerfully: "My Bridge is hopeless, Uncle Colin. When I played at one of Father Gleever's socials, I revoked three times. It was ghastly, and I nearly died! The people at my table looked as though they could have killed me. I'm sure they thought I'd done it on purpose, to try and win the prize."

"Never mind, darling. You are at least honest about your game, and admit you're no good. It's really amazing the number of people who say they Bridge and don't! How I've suffered! Anyway—what about Newmarket; or Vingt-et-un? You may win some money at that; and, incidentally, so might I?"

"Or Chess?" Mary suggested. "I mean, for you two men, of course. You used to play, Colin; and Henry enjoys chess more than anything."

"No; please, Mary, not chess." Colin looked thoughtful. "I seem to remember it as a game where people go into a coma, and remain in that state for days on end. I wonder—would you be terribly hurt, and think Henry and me very unsociable, if we went into the library and had a good old heart-to-heart?"

Mary laughed. "I'm not the slightest bit hurt, Colin, and don't mind in the least if that's what you'd like to do."

"Well, I should. There are one or two things I want to talk over with Henry, and we shan't have another opportunity, as I must go back tomorrow; and on a very early train, I'm afraid."

Henry looked surprised. "Surely you can stay longer than that, old man? I mean—it's a heck of a journey to take, just to spend one night with us."

"It's a devil of a journey, Henry; you're right. From here up to Paddington—Paddington to Victoria—Victoria to Maidstone East; then a forty-minute bus ride into Millsham, but that's the way it is. And I'm lucky really to be here at all: my 'boss' wasn't too pleased at my asking for time off, right on top of my holiday; and it was only on the plea of having urgent business in Somerset, and the understanding that I returned the following day, that I got his permission to come away."

Henry, with brotherly candour, said: "Your life is all holiday, Colin. Millsham is such a small Authority that it's a wonder to me you ever find anything to do."

While Mary added: "You men had better go into the library and start your conference; and I'll send Hetty along with the coffee; and she'll bring your drinks at the same time, then you won't be disturbed again." She put her hand in Colin's and kissed him on the cheek. "I shall probably go on to bed, so I'll say good night now. God bless you, dear; and sleep well."

"I always do. And thank you for everything, Mary, including the blessing. I . . ." Colin hesitated, and Mary thought he suddenly looked haggard and older than his years—quite unlike himself, in fact. But, with Henry

calling from the hall: "Are you coming, Colin?" he merely said: "Yes, I'll be there in a second," and adding: "Good night, Mary," followed his brother into the library and closed the door.

Going back to the drawing-room, Viola put an arm around her mother's waist and said: "Well, that's got rid of the men! I wonder what on earth they'll talk about. Frightfully dull things, I imagine, like investing money and income tax."

"Oh, I don't know, dear. You must remember, Daddy hasn't seen Uncle Colin for a long time, so they'll have a lot to tell each other. Are you staying in this evening, Viola, or flying off somewhere?"

"No. I promised Granny I'd play bezique with her, as Jane's off duty. She's having supper at the vicarage, and going on to a concert with Mrs. Austley. Then I think I ought to do a spot of mending. All my undies seem to have gone in holes quite suddenly."

Mary said, resignedly: "You had better let me have them, before they get any worse. Honestly, Viola, you're as bad as Rick. I can't think what you wretched children do to your clothes. The truth of it is, darling, you hate sewing, and just allow the holes to grow bigger and bigger, rather than put a stitch for yourself."

"Yes, I know, Mummy. Only sewing is such a bind. Besides, apart from not wanting to be bothered with it, I really haven't the time!"

"Rubbish!" said Mary, but the laugh accompanying her words was indulgent, so Viola, quite unrepentent, skipped out of the room, while Mary, having answered some of the letters which had gradually piled up on her desk, settled down in a big armchair by the fire, with her knitting and a book. She felt pleasantly tired and a little sleepy; and when, in the end, she found it im-

possible to keep from yawning, Mary decided, since the clock had already struck ten, that she might as well go to bed.

It was restful to lie against the soft pillows, and feel the cool air on her face. The windows were opened as wide as they would go, and she could see a few bright stars, and a half-moon, high in the sky. But her eyelids closed drowsily, and, within a few minutes, lulled by the tiny soothing noises which can be heard in the country at night, Mary had drifted into a sound and dreamless sleep.

She awoke quite suddenly, and wondered, still a little bemused, what time it was. She couldn't hear anyone moving about; instead, a strange silence seemed to be over the house; so what in the world could Henry be doing, and why hadn't he come to bed? Switching on the table lamp, and seeing the hands of her jewelled clock pointing to half-past two, Mary sat up, then looked again at the clock, thinking she must have made a mistake. Put no—it was exactly half-past two, and Henry, presumably, was still downstairs, talking to Colin: "Which", Mary said aloud, "is perfectly ridiculous! They must be out of their minds. Colin will never get up in time to catch that early train. He'll be dead to the world at eight o'clock; and Henry, too."

Mary waited a moment, then reached for her silk dressing-gown and slippers, deciding that the most sensible thing to do, was to go down to the library, and if persuasion failed, order her men to come up to bed. She unlatched the door and went half-way down the stairs, quietly so as not to wake Viola. The hall lights were on, and she could hear movements in the library—the sound of a chair being pushed back, and somebody, probably Henry, poking the fire, then, just as she

reached the door, Colin's voice speaking her name. Undecided, feeling now that perhaps she ought not to disturb them, Mary heard him say: "I'm wondering what Mary's reactions will be when she hears of this. How is she going to take it?"

"Mary?" It was Henry speaking. "I'm afraid she'll take it badly. Mary's not a complaisant person, you know. I imagine the whole affair will shock and horrify her. Or shall I say it would if she ever got to hear the truth? But, you see, the whole point is, she won't. This is something between ourselves, Colin, and Mary must never know."

"You mean that you don't intend to tell her?" and Mary, too anxious and disturbed to realize what she was doing, and that she had no right to listen to their conversation, could detect the incredulity in Colin's voice.

"No; not unless it became absolutely necessary. After all, a woman is entitled to her dreams; and I see no reason why Mary should be disillusioned, do you?"

"Well." Colin must have been considering this. "But if you don't tell her, somebody else may."

"No," Henry said again, speaking in his usual decisive tone of voice, "I shall tie things up so that nothing leaks out. And I'm relying on you, Colin, to help me there. Actually, I should have preferred not to bring Mary's name into this; and now, I suggest we leave matters as they are, and say no more."

There was the sound of another chair being moved, and Mary, knowing they were about to come out of the library, turned quickly and ran up the stairs, noiselessly and scarcely daring to breathe. Once in her room, she switched off the light and got back into bed, lying very straight and still, bewildered and with her mind full of

doubt and conflicting thoughts. What was this secret which she wasn't to know, and must never be told to her? Something important . . . terrifying or shameful? If it were Henry's secret, it could be the first: it might even be terrifying, considering the dangerous work he was engaged upon; but not shameful. Never that with Henry. It must, then, have to do and be connected in some way with his job. A secret which he felt at liberty to tell Colin but not his wife, because she was a woman; and women, as he'd pointed out, were entitled to keep their dreams and illusions.

Mary drew a sigh of relief. Yes, of course, that was what it had all been about: and she wouldn't dream of telling Henry how she'd crept downstairs and listened to their conversation; because it was a dreadful thing to do—she realized that, now, and felt thoroughly ashamed of herself.

She heard him, then, moving about in his dressing-room, very quietly as though afraid of disturbing her; so when he opened the communicating door, she said: "It's all right, dear. I'm awake. Shall I put on the light for you?"

"No; don't bother. I can see." Henry came over to the bed and laid his hand on her arm. He said: "Why aren't you asleep, Mary? And you're cold. What have you been doing? Shall I close some of those windows?"

"Please not, Henry. I like the air: unless you want them shut."

"No, of course I don't." Henry kicked off his slippers, and stifled a yawn, adding as he climbed into bed: "Heigh-ho! I'm tired, I shan't need much rocking to-night."

Mary said, gently: "You mean this morning, darling." Then: "Has Colin gone to bed?"

‘Yes.’

There was a little silence which Mary broke. Her voice came out of the darkness, asking: “Did you put the screen on, Henry, and leave everything safe downstairs?”

“What’s the matter with you, Mary! I put the guard on and chucked every cigarette-end into the grate. I don’t want to catch the house on fire any more than you. For heaven’s sake stop fussing and let me get to sleep.”

There was another silence; much longer this time. Then Henry said: “I’m sorry, dear. I didn’t mean to be cross. It’s only . . .”

“What, Henry?”

“Nothing; nothing at all.”

“Are you sure, darling? The work’s not worrying you, is it?”

“D’you mean my job?” Henry still sounded a little querulous. He went on before she could answer: “My work is fine. It gets on top of us, at times, and we all feel fed to the teeth; but so might any man; unless he were an archangel, which I’m not nor ever likely to be. What I need now is a good night’s rest. I’m perfectly all right,” said Henry, turning over on his side and pulling the pillows about. “So stop worrying, and let’s try and get some sleep. You’re the one who is keeping us both awake, Mary.” Which remark, though true, was, in Mary’s opinion, most unfair and rather unkind; but just the kind a worried and overtired husband would make.

Chapter Five

THE next morning, however, upon thinking things over, Mary decided that whatever Henry said, the fact remained—he was worried—whether he wanted to admit it or not. He wouldn't have spoken so sharply to her otherwise, because, though Henry, like most men, got tetchy at times, and adopted an attitude of long-suffering patience towards women and their little foibles, one couldn't imagine him ever being rude to Jean.

Last night, Henry had been decidedly cross; and his irritability, she felt sure, wasn't, as he tried to make out, due to tiredness, but worry, and caused by having some trouble or anxiety on his mind. And if she hadn't already known that he'd hardly slept at all, the dark circles under his eyes, and an air of weariness about him, would have informed her of the fact. She noted both when he came in from his dressing-room, but wisely made no comment. She said, instead: "What train is Colin catching? I hope he hasn't overslept himself."

"No; I went up to his room to make sure. We're just going to have breakfast. I'm driving him into the station, and he'll get the nine-fifteen with any luck." Henry added: "Don't bother to come down, Mary. For one thing, you're not dressed and we haven't a lot of time. I'll wish Colin good-bye for you."

"All right, dear. Tell him to give my love to Primrose and Billy. And say how glad we were to see him, of course."

"I will." Henry waited a moment; then asked, a little awkwardly: "How d'you feel this morning, Mary? I'm afraid you didn't get much rest—what with my thrashing about, and throwing the pillows around."

"Were you?" Mary opened innocent eyes. "Poor dear! Never mind; you must come to bed early tonight and make up for it."

Henry said: "Well, we'll see," and went away, leaving Mary wondering whether she'd had some kind of nightmare, and dreamt that Henry was worried and cross; because, except for the look of strain on his face, he seemed quite himself, and hadn't said a word about last night's happenings, or thought it necessary to tell her what he and Colin were discussing so gravely and earnestly. Mary sighed, thinking it was all very puzzling; so, after breakfast, she went up to see her mother-in-law, just in case Henry had confided his trouble to her. But, apparently, nothing had been told to Mrs. Delair—at least, nothing of a disturbing nature. She seemed, if anything, more cheerful than usual, and was obviously delighted to have seen Colin again, especially as this visit hadn't ended in having to hand over a cheque to her attractive and handsome, but rather unsatisfactory son.

"Actually," Mrs. Delair said, looking amused, "it's the first time Colin has been down here and not asked either Henry or me for money. That's what's so amazing; and I'm still wondering what on earth made him come! I suppose he must have wanted to see us all again."

Mary laughed. "You sound very surprised, Mother."

"Surprised! My dear child, I'm staggered; but equally pleased, of course, because it shows Colin's feelings for his family are not entirely mercenary." She paused; then went on more soberly: "You know, Mary, I'm sure people must wonder why Colin has so much less than his brother, and think it's most unfair. They don't realize, that my husband made ample provision for him. The property, naturally, was left to Henry, but Colin came in for quite a lot of money at his father's death; and he could have done well at his profession, if only he'd stuck to it, so there's no reason for him to be in the position he is. We can't, however, tell people that; nor will anyone ever know the times Henry has helped his brother, and got him out of difficulties."

"No," said Mary, "it's just one of those things which families keep to themselves."

She spoke thoughtfully, wondering if this might, perhaps, be the explanation of that long discussion between Henry and Colin, last night. Had Colin got into some difficulty, and come to his brother for advice and help? It was possible, but not, Mary felt, the real answer to her problem. Because, Henry seemed far more involved than Colin: Henry was the one who had spoken so decisively, and said what must and must not be done. And after due consideration, and recalling the conversation she had overheard, Mary came to the conclusion that the secret they were determined should be kept from her, was something to do with Henry's work, and she need not, therefore, worry or think of the matter again: unless Henry finally decided to confide in her and ask for sympathy and help; in which case, of course, she would gladly give him both.

When Henry got back that evening, she thought he still looked tired and rather strained about the eyes and

mouth; and for the next two or three days, whenever she spoke to him, he answered her absent-mindedly, as though he were preoccupied, and thinking of more important things than his family and home. And Mary, being a sensible woman, and knowing that her husband's research work, apart from carrying grave responsibility, must, of necessity, tax his brain, didn't take this amiss, or complain of neglect when he shut himself up in the library for hours on end.

She understood, or thought she did, and went about her own housewifely duties, quite happy and perfectly content, because she was a simple-hearted person, and enjoyed the simple things of life. There were friends who must be entertained and visited, and with Cookie going off for her fortnight's holiday, Mary had extra to do, although Hetty, fortunately, liked cooking and was really very good at it. Then, at the end of the week, Viola announced that she'd been invited to Chelm, with Alice, who usually paid her cousins a visit in the spring.

"For my sins," Alice said. "And don't bother about clothes, Vi, because we live in suits. We're compelled to. The house is vast, and devastatingly cold. And I'm warning you, we may have to help with the 'chores', and Cousin Emmie has weird ideas about food—her latest craze, I believe, is vegetarianism. But Cousin George is rather a pet, so we may manage to get some fun out of it."

Viola was quite certain they would. Anyway, she had no intention of turning the invitation down; and everything being settled, Mary and Mrs. Taplow saw them off on the Tuesday, and waved good-bye until the train was out of sight, each knowing that they were going to miss their daughter, badly, though Mrs. Taplow would,

no doubt, be the lonelier of the two, because, as she pointed out, Mary had Henry *and* a mother-in-law, whereas Alice was her one and only support.

With Viola away and not even Rick at home, the house did seem unusually quiet, but Mary hadn't the time to feel lonely. The garden needed attention, as gardens always do, and she spent many happy hours down at the church, mending the vestments and altar linen for Father Cleever, besides calling on friends whom she had rather neglected of late, and visiting Mrs. Clonnel, and those living in the village who were either poor or sick.

Hearing from Miss Perry that Mrs. Austley was expecting another baby, Mary went along to see her one afternoon; and sitting in the lovely drawing-room, talking to the vicar's pretty young wife, she remembered how Miss Perry had added, rather triumphantly, that if the Austleys were going to have a baby every year they would soon be cramped for space, and wish they hadn't started chopping the vicarage about, but kept it for themselves. Smiling at the thought, Mary felt tempted to tell Sheila Austley what was amusing her, because she would have appreciated the joke; but as Mr. Austley came in at that moment, with the doctor and Mrs. Fabian, she hadn't a chance.

Greetings were exchanged, and once the conversation became general, it immediately and quite naturally drifted to the topics in which the English as a race take such a passionate interest—namely, the weather and the state of their health. Each of them, it seemed, had been laid up with something—either a cold or a touch of lumbago; and Mrs. Fabian was able to go one better, since she'd had to stay in bed for two weeks with a *really bad attack* of tonsillitis.

Afterwards, Mary recalled having contributed her share, though in a slightly lesser degree, by extolling her dentist in London, and explaining how marvellous he was, and why she would never dream of going to anyone else. But whether the very mention of Mr. Vyvian's name had power to start one's teeth aching, Mary didn't know—it hardly seemed possible—yet, when later that evening, she drank a glass of cold water, she certainly felt a twinge—or if not a twinge, a definite tenderness around one particular tooth; and tenderness, according to Mr. Vyvian, usually spelled trouble, and should, therefore, be attended to at once. So, whilst they were having breakfast the next morning, Mary said: "I think I must go up and see Mr. Vyvian, Henry. You don't mind, do you, dear? I'll only stay one night."

Henry, engrossed in *The Times*, murmured: "Of course not." Then, laying his paper aside, added: "I'm sorry, Mary. What's wrong? Have you got raging toothache?"

"No; only a very slight pain when I drink anything hot or cold, but it oughtn't to be neglected. I shall go up on the eleven o'clock train; and if I ring Mr. Vyvian from here, he may be able to fit me in some time this afternoon."

"Yes; you'd better make an appointment beforehand, otherwise it might mean your having to hang about, and stay in London for several days."

Mary smiled. "And we neither of us want that to happen, do we, darling? I hate leaving you, Henry, especially as Viola is away; but you'll have Mother to talk to in the evening; and it isn't as though I were going for weeks."

"My dear girl, I shall be perfectly all right! Actually,

I'm so busy at the moment I hardly know whether you're here or not. No. . . ." Henry hurriedly amended his words. "Of course I do! What I'm trying to say is, I might have to go away, myself, for a night or two."

"Really, Henry! But why? On business? Do you mean, to London?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure where it will be." Henry looked and sounded ill at ease, so Mary, thinking: More secrets, I suppose, for my poor Henry! What new horrors are they planning now, I wonder? got up from the table; and explaining that his mother and Cookie must be told she would be away for the night, gave him a kiss which held something of sympathy and tenderness in it, as well as love, and went out of the room.

As Oakbridge was on a branch line, people travelling to London usually cut out the local train, finding it quicker and more convenient to go into Bath and pick up a non-stop to Paddington from there, and Mary, upon the advice of Henry and her mother-in-law, decided she would do this, since she could drive herself to Bath and garage the car, and have it waiting for her when she returned. Mary really preferred travelling by train to anything else: for one thing, it was restful— one hadn't to be perpetually watching the road, and looking out for traffic and other cars— unless, of course, the train happened to be crowded, with people standing three deep in the corridors, when one's journey, needless to say, was anything but restful.

Today, however, Mary had been lucky; the only other person in the compartment besides herself was a young and very good-looking naval officer, who, the moment she appeared, took her suitcase with a courteous: "May I help you?" and put it up on the rack—a

small attention, but one she appreciated, and expected from a man of his standing.

Knowing they would be undisturbed, she settled herself comfortably in a corner seat, prepared to enjoy the journey; thinking at first of Henry, and wishing he could have come with her, then trying to plan the hours ahead, and what she could do in London on her own.

Mr. Vyvian's nurse had said he would see her at half-past three, so allowing an hour for him to poke about with his horrid little instruments, and do whatever was necessary to her teeth, she ought to be through by half-past four, or say five o'clock, because Mr. Vyvian did talk rather a lot, and always wasted an enormous amount of time. That left the evening when she could either try for a seat at one of the theatres or see a picture—she'd better get a paper to find out what was playing and being shown in the West End; though she would much rather take a walk, and go along to the Oratory and say some prayers; then return to the flat, and have her supper in bed. That really was what she'd like to do this evening—just rest and relax— and tomorrow, look around the shops. She ought, perhaps, to get a new spring suit, and it might be a good idea to buy one of Peter Robinson's attractive and inexpensive "off the peg's" for Viola. Anyway, she could go along and see what they had to offer; and she must call at that shop in South Molton Street for some of Henry's special chocolate. It was the only kind he really enjoyed—or so he said.

Meanwhile, the train continued on its way, rushing past tiny country stations, then rattling and swinging through Swindon and Didcot, when an attendant came down the corridor, calling: "Take your places for luncheon, please."

The young officer slid back the door for Mary, who said: "Are you having lunch on the train?"

"Yes; may I . . . would you mind if we had it together?" He added: "I loathe eating alone."

Mary smiled. "So do I. It will be nice to have your company."

Walking to the dining-car, they exchanged names; and over lunch Mary learnt that he'd just come off his ship, having been stationed at Malta, and was on his way to the Admiralty. She found him a most entertaining companion, and when, upon reaching Paddington, he put her into a taxi, they parted with mutual regret and hopes of meeting again, knowing, however, that this was unlikely. And, in actual fact, the last Mary ever saw of him was running along Praeger Street after a bus, and finally boarding a number fifteen.

2

When Mary went into the flat, she felt its warmth a little overpowering. The heating, then, must be on, and Hadley certainly knew how to stoke up his furnace. Her rooms, too, like all shut up places, were slightly stuffy, and smelt strongly of tobacco and Turkish cigarettes; so the first thing she did was to open all the windows, thinking that Colin must have smoked himself dry. She said aloud:

"I do wish, though, it hadn't been Turkish. They leave such a heavy and sickly smell. But I suppose, if you lend your flat to other people, you've got to expect that kind of thing. And I'll soon have the place freshened up and thoroughly aired."

She had stopped on her way, and told the taxi-driver

to wait, whilst she bought milk and bread, a grapefruit, and some eggs and a lettuce, from one of those little shops which appear to sell everything; and having put these away in the larder, she got out sheets from the linen cupboard and made up her bed; then dusted the sitting-room—rather sketchily—because she only just had time to get to Mr. Vyvian's house by half-past three. In any case, it meant taking a taxi, as he lived near Regent's Park; and standing on the steps, Mary thought again what lovely houses these were, and how graciously people must have lived, in the days they had been built.

Greeting her, Miss Pollard, Mr. Vyvian's nurse-receptionist, said: "Well, it is nice to see you again, Mrs. Delair. Mr. Vyvian's just ready. You won't have to wait at all. Come right in to the surgery. You've brought a beautiful day, too! So sunny and warm."

Mr. Vyvian was not only delighted to see Mary, but seemed to think she ought to have come before. Turning the pages of his register, he said: "Let's just check up, now. Hm—yes. You were here in February: you came to me on the 23rd. That's a little over two months ago."

"But not three," said Mary. "Surely I can go three months without having my teeth looked at?"

"Well, perhaps," Mr. Vyvian admitted rather grudgingly. "However. . . ." He handed Mary into his chair and worked it up to the right height. "Where's the trouble? Which side? And lower or upper jaw?"

Mary, putting a finger in her mouth, indicated merely by qucer and inarticulate noises that it was "up there", whereupon Mr. Vyvian snatched her hand away, uttering a shocked and reproofing: "Never put fingers in your mouth. It's most unhygienic," and proceeded, with the

aid of a particularly nasty-looking instrument and a tiny long-handled mirror, to find out exactly where the trouble lay. His hands, Mary noticed as she always did, were beautifully shaped, and smelt of antiseptics and fragrant soap. Their touch was sure, yet, at the same time, so gentle that he seemed to persuade, rather than force, one to "open wide" or "close up" as the case may be.

After about five minutes' probing, during which Mr. Vyvian had told Mary all about his eldest boy who was going to Marlborough next term, he ordered her briskly "to rinse", and added: "Only one small filling, Mrs. Delair; and, I think, a scaling as you're here. Otherwise everything's perfect. You really have", Mr. Vyvian acknowledged, handsomely, "very beautiful teeth. Now, tell me—I should have asked before—how is your good husband? And the children? I hope they're well."

Mary, rinsing dutifully and wiping her mouth with a small fringed napkin, was about to answer his kind inquiry, but Mr. Vyvian had already wheeled forward his drill and put a glass tube into her mouth; so again she was forced to indicate by still queerer noises that they were all in perfect health. Pedalling madly, and, quite miraculously, Mary thought, keeping his instrument and the glass tube from meeting, with disastrous results, Mr. Vyvian then told her how his wife had flown to the telephone and dialled 999, when she saw a man climbing through a window of the next-door house, and got the fellow caught. The story took time, and he finished it sitting at his little table, mixing and pounding away at the filling which would, eventually, be put into her tooth. So far so good, though the worst, Mary knew, was still to come. Of all things, she hated a

scaling most, but had to admit it was worth enduring for the sake of the lovely gleam and shine on her teeth.

By this time, since Miss Pollard could count and always told the truth, there were six people in the waiting-room, glancing through glossy magazines, longing to see Mr. Vyvian, and probably cursing him in their hearts. So Mary put on her hat, adjusting it to the right angle in front of a mirror; and after Mr. Vyvian had helped her on with her coat, they shook hands and expressed pleasure at having seen each other again, while Miss Pollard stood by, ready to open doors, and finally saw Mary off, with a pleasant: "Good afternoon, Mrs. Delair," and an added: "Thank you so much"; though for what, neither she nor Mary had the slightest idea.

In any case, all Mary could think of for the moment was tea; it seemed a long time ago since she'd lunched with the nice naval boy; and remembering an attractive little café in Baker Street, where they gave good service and made a special and delectable kind of cake, she signalled to a cruising taxi, telling the driver to put her down on the corner opposite Baker Street Underground.

The café, apparently, closed at half-past five, but the waitress, a pleasant-faced, elderly woman, said, certainly madam could have tea; and, yes, they still made the little almond-flavoured cakes. Madam would like some? And toasted scones, perhaps? With China tea. Very good. It should be brought immediately. Pleased by her manner and the atmosphere of the place, Mary sat down at a table and pulled off her gloves, deciding she had been wise to come here, rather than a large and crowded restaurant. It was convenient, too, because she could get a 74 bus outside the door right to the Oratory;

or she might, perhaps, only go as far as Hyde Park Corner and walk the rest of the way home.

Looking round the room, she noticed that very few people were having tea, besides herself: a young man, engrossed in his book; an older man with his wife and daughter, who remained completely silent, except for a timid: "Yes, dear, I agree," and: "I don't mind, Father. You must decide," which appeared to please Father if nobody else; and two women at the next table, discussing the scandalous behaviour of somebody's husband—at least, it sounded to Mary as though they were—because one of them said: "But why does Helen put up with it? She must realize what's going on."

And the other, in full agreement: "I know. Personally, I think she's a fool. You wouldn't find me being quite so complaisant. If Ronnie ever goes after another woman I shall just walk out on him. I don't believe in sharing my husband with anyone else."

Her friend said, laughingly: "Plenty do, my dear." Then quite suddenly changed the conversation by asking Ronnie's wife, who, Mary discovered, was called Gladys, if she'd seen those marvellous little hats in Derry and Toms?

"Quite reasonable; and awfully attractive. I bought two—a red and a blue."

Gladys said yes, she knew all about them, and meant to go along tomorrow and see what they were like. Mary could picture her, first trying on, then discarding, the cheap little hats, and drifting over to the more expensive models, one of which, no doubt, she would buy. Also, after they'd paid their bill and left the café, she found herself feeling sorry for Helen, whoever Helen might be, and wondering whether losing her

husband to another woman had broken her heart. It sounded a sad story; and the poor girl must be suffering terribly.

Sitting back in her chair, and pouring herself a second cup of tea, Mary thought: "I don't know how wives bear it. I just couldn't! Thank God I'm married to a man I can trust; a good man, too: one who regards infidelity as something morally wrong. It's utterly impossible even to imagine Henry being unfaithful to me; but if he were, I think I should die! I should want to . . . there wouldn't be anything left in life."

It was foolish, however, to get so worked up, and visualize herself dying of grief over a thing which could never happen. But when she left the café, Mary suddenly realized she was tired, and, deciding that the walk from Hyde Park Corner would be too much for her, took a bus right to the Oratory. Here, she felt a sudden and urgent need, born, perhaps, of her recent thoughts, to pray for herself and Henry—not as separate individuals, but an entirety, as husband and wife—that they might keep true to each other, and remain faithful to their marriage vows. Even the best, she knew, were tempted at times, and some, in a moment of weakness, fell. So, wrapped around by the stillness and beauty of the great church, she prayed; until, calmed and restored, she rose from her knees, feeling comforted and strangely at peace.

She came out to find silver rods of rain falling in an April shower, and the surrounding buildings etched against a primrose sky. Buses, bringing the rush-hour crowds back from their work, tore past her as she sheltered in a doorway; the air, Mary thought, was lovely—so moist and fresh: then, with a pale sun emerging, and only a few drops pattering off the trees,

she walked on, and by taking short cuts into and through small side streets, she managed to get back in the dry, though another shower started just as she reached Draycott Avenue, and it meant running from there to her flat.

Opening her own front door and going into the tiny hall, Mary drew a sigh of relief, knowing that she could spend a quiet and restful evening, and need not go out again tonight. She closed the windows in the sitting-room—it was quite aired now—switched on the electric fire and drew the curtains, not only because there were houses opposite, but to make things cosier. She then ran a bath—the water, blessings on Hadley, the dear man—came boiling out of the tap! after which, feeling both rested and refreshed, Mary put on a comfortable velvet house-gown, and went out to prepare a meal for herself.

It was whilst she was in the kitchen that the front doorbell rang, and hearing it Mary gave a startled exclamation and dropped a knife. Who in the world could it be? Nobody but Mr. Vyvian knew she was in London, and he'd seen enough of her this afternoon. Then the bell rang again . . . and again, with a pause between, and thinking: "It's probably somebody who has mistaken the flats; or perhaps Hadley's taken a message for me, Mary went to the door, switching on the light as she came through the hall."

A girl was standing outside—a tall, slender girl, wearing a blue tweed coat and a yellow scarf which matched her gloves. She was bareheaded—the rain-drops, Mary noticed, were glistening on her dark hair; and after a second's hesitation, she said: "Mrs. Delair?" making it sound a statement of fact rather than a question, though Mary chose to take it as such.

She said: "Yes; I'm Mrs. Delair," and the girl must have detected a note of surprise in her voice, because she went on hurriedly: "You don't know me at all . . . you won't even know my name. It's Crayle—Sylvia Crayle. I wanted . . . I mean, could I speak to you?"

"Yes; of course." Mary closed the door, adding as she went into the sitting-room: "I was just making some coffee for myself. Perhaps you'd like a cup. It's a wretched evening, isn't it? Sit here by the fire. What about your coat? Why not take it off?"

"I won't, thank you; unless—well, yes—it might be best as I did get a bit wet, and your room is nice and warm." She stood up, and Mary taking her coat noticed it was well cut if shabby, and that the girl herself was even prettier than she'd thought: quite beautiful, in fact. Educated? yes, up to a point; a lady? no, definitely not. There was something in her manner which jarred . . . something Mary couldn't understand . . . and she began to wonder who her visitor was, and what business this strange girl could possibly have to discuss. She said then: "You must forgive my asking, but are you by any chance calling on people for subscriptions to a particular charity? Or," Mary smiled, "trying to get me to join some new Society?"

"Oh no! Nothing-like that; nor," Sylvia tilted her head, "am I selling anything."

"Well," Mary made a helpless little gesture. "It's really most puzzling. You're a complete stranger to me, yet you knew I was Mrs. Delair. But how? Have we ever met? And where?"

Sylvia flushed and shook her head. "I can't say we've actually met, Mrs. Delair, but I've seen you before. The first time was at the Newbold's party. D'you remember they gave a dance on New Year's Eve?"

"Good gracious, yes! My husband and I came up for it specially. Colonel and Mrs. Newbold are very old friends of ours. Were you there?"

This time Sylvia merely nodded, not wishing to explain that she had attended the Newbold's dance in an official capacity—actually as the band's pianist. She went on, however: "I couldn't help noticing you. You had on such a lovely dress and looked so beautiful; and when I asked somebody who the lady was in the oyster satin, they told me you were a Mrs. Delair."

"I see." Mary hesitated. "But, apparently, we weren't introduced."

"No. I met your husband, though."

"Did you really!" Mary's delicate brows arched themselves in surprise. "I thought he played bridge most of the evening, but there was such a crowd, nobody really knew what anyone was doing half the time."

For a moment neither of them spoke; then Sylvia said: "And I've seen you since that night, Mrs. Delair, but only once; last February it was. You were walking down Regent Street with . . . with your husband. I never forget faces."

"Like Royalty. It's a most useful gift," said Mary, still smiling but beginning to feel rather tired of Miss Crayle. "Do tell me, though, I really am puzzled as to how you knew I was here at the flat; and—forgive me, I don't wish to appear discourteous---why you came to call on me."

"Well," Sylvia spoke slowly, "that's easily explained. 'I've always known you had a flat in London; and where it was. And luckily I happened to be passing this afternoon, just as you came out. I couldn't do anything then, because you got into a taxi; but I guessed you'd be staying overnight . . . that's why I came back. I knew

it was a chance I might never get again. I thought—she'll listen and be kind, since my life's happiness is involved. I felt I must see you, Mrs. Delair . . . I *had* to . . . and I'm asking . . . begging you, now, to be generous."

"Generous?" Mary repeated the word. She looked and felt completely at a loss, and was even more bewildered when Sylvia, with a note of hardness in her voice, added deliberately: "To divorce your husband, Mrs. Delair."

Chapter Six

MARY was so utterly taken aback, that for a moment she couldn't even think, let alone speak; until it gradually dawned on her, that this girl was referring to Henry; and realizing the full implications of Sylvia's words, she felt anger rising in her like a tide—fierce, primitive anger—though she had no intention of showing it.

Coldly, and as one might address a tiresome child, Mary said: "I really don't understand. There could be no possible connection between my husband and yourself. Quite obviously, you are mistaking me for somebody else; so shall we leave it at that?"

She stood up, but Sylvia remained seated. Undefinably, her manner had changed; it was confident—almost insolently so—and her voice was not only assured but faintly derisive, when she said: "If I'd made a mistake, Mrs. Delair, how would I have known the number of this flat; or that you lived in the country, and all about the important work your husband does? I realize, of course, how you must be feeling; but even if the truth is painful, it's better, I think, to face up to it."

"And what is the truth?" Mary asked. She felt a little faint: fear enveloped her . . . tugged at her heart. The room was spinning. She put a hand on the back of a chair to steady herself, seeing, through a red mist, Sylvia's face—eager, predatory; heard her voice, as

though coming from a distance, relating a fantastic story of how they—presumably Henry and herself—had fallen in love the first time they met at the Newbold's dance; and, in spite of only being able to see each other occasionally, their love had grown—apparently, neither of them now could live without the other: and they need not, if Mrs. Delair would be generous, and agree to a divorce.

Mary sat down slowly, resting her hands on the arms of the chair. She felt unutterably weary . . . drained of life, realizing in anguish that the truth for which she had asked was indeed told. Henry and this girl! Oh God, no! It wasn't possible. Henry, her husband, in love with another woman . . . wanting his freedom, after twenty years of marriage! It couldn't be true. What of his faith? As a practising Catholic, he knew that divorce was out of the question—it would never enter his mind. Unless—Mary closed her eyes, knowing this was possible—Henry, like those others she'd thought of whilst praying in the Oratory, had found temptation too much for him. He must have been attracted to this girl, and, unable to resist her beauty and appeal, given way, perhaps in a moment of weakness, to a love which could only bring shame on himself, and terrible grief and unhappiness to his wife.

Rousing herself from a stupor of pain and bewilderment, and schooling her voice so as not to betray what she was feeling, Mary said at last: "I don't think there is any need for us to discuss this matter, Miss Crayle. Quite frankly, I look upon your visit as an insult. You have, I consider, taken an unpardonable liberty in coming here at all; and I naturally shouldn't dream of committing myself as regards the ridiculous request you made—I mean, to divorce my husband. By the way

—as a matter of interest—did he know you were coming to see me?”

“Of course not. It was my own idea entirely; and I didn’t even know, myself, until I saw you this afternoon. I have begged him, though, over and over again, to tell you . . . everything, and ask for a divorce. But he always says it wouldn’t be the slightest use—that you don’t approve of it. I suppose . . .” Sylvia hesitated. “I sometimes wonder if that’s true. Is it, Mrs. Delair?”

“Quite true; also, and it might be as well for you to remember this, my husband holds exactly the same views as I do. He is a Catholic; and our church forbids divorce.”

“Oh yes, I know. But I don’t imagine he’d let that interfere—I mean, if he wanted to disobey his church he would; whereas you—well, you’re really good—he’s told me so, and that sometimes he finds it hard to live up to your high standards and principles.”

“Please!” Mary made a gesture. “I don’t wish to hear. I’m not the least interested.” That Henry should have discussed her with this woman was quite the worst she’d had to bear. She felt shaken—bruised, as though somebody had struck her with rods. She said, then: “I shall never divorce my husband, Miss Crayle. He will never—not as long as I live—be free to marry you.”

“But why?” Sylvia clenched her hands. “Don’t you realize what you’re doing? I love him . . . he loves me. You can’t keep us apart—you couldn’t be so cruel. We belong to each other. He’s . . . he’s just my life,” Sylvia ended, passionately.

Yes, Mary could understand this. Henry was certainly her life. After twenty years, one’s husband becomes essential—like the air one breathes; her whole

happiness depended on Henry; she loved him so dearly; the clasp of his arms meant absolute security. Security! Mary came to earth on the word. Where was her security now? She had none, In giving his love to another woman, Henry had robbed her of everything. And God alone knew how this was to end; or, if and when she confronted Henry with the truth, what she would say to him.

Almost at breaking point, Mary said: "Please go; and don't ever try to see me again. You have made your request, and been given my answer, which, I might add, is irrevocable. Neither you nor anyone else could make me change my mind."

Sylvia raised her eyes. They were darkly blue—eyes which a man might find hard to resist, but there was an ugly sneer on her carefully reddened lips as she said: "I just can't understand your attitude. It's so . . . so diabolically selfish! No woman with any decency would try and keep a man if he'd stopped loving her, and wanted to marry somebody else. If I were in your place, and my husband asked for his freedom, pride alone would make me give it to him. I'd have to; I couldn't do anything else."

"That may be." Mary spoke quietly. "But you and I are totally different characters. We don't think alike—especially on fundamentals, such as divorce and morality. Besides, my husband hasn't asked for his freedom. He's never once brought the subject up or mentioned it to me."

"No; and why? Because he knows exactly what you'd say. And it's always been the same . . . all through his married life. You must come first! Your likes and dislikes must be considered! You've never once thought of his happiness; only your own. Oh, he's told me . . . Gerrard tells me everything. . . ."

Sylvia broke off suddenly, because Mary had half-risen from her chair, then leant back again, with what Sylvia thought was rather a queer expression on her face. She wasn't to know, nor would she ever know, since Mary saw no reason for telling her, that Gerrard was Henry's second name: she had no idea, either of the comfort, small and pitiful though it was, Mary derived from the fact, that Henry, when embarking upon this affair—perhaps for very shame—had used a name other than the one by which he was known in his own home.

Sylvia merely wondered what Mrs. Delair was thinking about to bring that look on her face. She longed to know but didn't dare ask. In the end, all she said was: "I can see it's hopeless trying to make you understand. I came here this evening, thinking we could talk things over, and that you'd be reasonable. Now I know, Gerrard and I will just have to go on, doing what we've always done—meeting whenever we can, and taking every chance to be together, even if it's only for an hour or two. Because, nothing will stop us loving each other . . . nothing on earth. You may keep him tied to your side, but you'll know all the time that he's longing to get away and be with me."

She reached for her coat and stood, a little awkwardly, in the middle of the room to put it on, and tie the yellow scarf around her throat.

It was then that Mary realized how young she was—nineteen, perhaps, or twenty-two at most in actual years, not much older than Viola, but, by her own admission, vastly more experienced; already, at this age, involved with a married man. Somebody must be at fault; either her parents or, Mary thought, sadly, the men she met, and, amidst all the turmoil of hurt and

pain, found pity creeping into her heart. She blamed Henry, too. Apart from the sin and terrible injury to herself, how could he have brought this child—she was little more—to such a pass, and deliberately set out to make her fall in love with him!

Sylvia might and probably had gone half-way to meet him—in these days and to some girls the fact that a man was married only added zest to the affair—but Henry must have been the first to start it all; and having once started, found himself gradually getting more and more involved. If only he'd stopped to think, none of this terrible trouble would have come about; and, because the pity was still in her heart, Mary felt moved, even compelled, to stop in the hall for a moment and say:

"I wonder, has it ever occurred to you that things might work out quite differently to what you imagine. I mean—men get these sudden infatuations—sometimes, I think, they're not altogether responsible for their actions, but they nearly always go back to their wives in the end."

Sylvia laughed. "Are you warning me off?"

"No; merely trying to point out that you are behaving very foolishly and laying up great unhappiness for yourself. In cases like this, so often it is the other woman who gets hurt."

"Thank you," said Sylvia, "I'm sure you mean well, but I'll take the risk." She opened the door and stood for a moment with the shaded lights in the corridor shining on her dark hair. She added, then: "I won't offer to shake hands—I expect you'd rather not. Anyway—good night, Mrs. Delair. Happy dreams!" With that, she turned and ran down the stone staircase, leaving Mary alone.

2

The words were mocking but Mary scarcely heard them. It was those others: "I love him . . . he loves me . . . we belong to each other"—which rang in her ears throughout the night, as she lay wide-eyed and sleepless, feeling the grief and hurt like a physical pain across her heart, and realizing, with an anguish too deep for tears, that she had lost her husband's love. So, it had come—after twenty years! She was to experience what, up to now, she'd only heard of from other unhappy wives, read about, seen enacted on the stage and screen, when, sometimes, she had even laughed, because the whole thing seemed so utterly impossible, and a little ridiculous. The eternal triangle! A tiresome theme, she'd always thought; and a situation which, thank God, could never arise between Henry and herself. But she had been too sure . . . too trusting; and it was the knowledge that Henry had deceived and lied to her, which finally broke Mary down. Lying in the darkness, the tears running down her cheeks, she whispered: "Fool—fool that I was! Why didn't I guess the truth?"

She saw everything now quite clearly; it was all explained. Henry's distraught and absent manner—the queer expression and worried look in his eyes: the ready excuse of extra work and having to be at the Station, when he arrived home late; even the conversation she had overheard that night. She remembered Henry's decided: "Mary must never know."

And Colin's incredulous: "You mean, that you don't intend to tell her?"

What else but an illicit love affair would have to be

kept from her? And Henry had said something about women being entitled to their dreams, and that one ought not to disillusion them. How blind she had been! She might have known then that Henry was involved with another woman; and having, for some reason, told Colin about it, he would naturally swear his brother to secrecy. She saw, too, just as clearly, the kind of affair Henry was having with this girl: the infrequent, hurriedly arranged meetings—somewhere between London and his home, all so underhand and both in deadly fear of running into Henry's friends. Their first rapture at being together would gradually turn into despair as the hour of parting drew near, knowing that weeks might go by before they could see each other again. Letters would be exchanged—Sylvia's, no doubt, sent care of a post office, most probably in Bath or some other neighbouring town. Oh God! how had Henry sunk so low as to lend himself to that kind of thing! How could he bear the subterfuge and deceit—the shoddy, backstair atmosphere: was he so bewitched by this girl that honour and duty—even his faith—meant nothing compared to his love for her?

Slowly the hours crept by. A church clock struck the quarters with maddening regularity; Mary found herself waiting and listening for its chime. In the adjoining flats, at the back, somebody had their wireless on; a torch-singer was putting over a sad little tune, and above the distant murmur and throb of London's traffic she could hear other homely, domestic sounds: the clink of dishes being washed up at a sink; a woman's voice calling: "Douglas! bring me out the coffee cups, will you?" Laughter and whistling, and the tap of high heels on the pavement below.

Would this night ever pass, Mary wondered, and laid

her weary head on the pillow again. And what was she to do? To whom could she go for help and advice? Not Henry's mother; she'd already had her share of suffering. It was equally impossible to tell the children; they adored their father and thought the world of him. Whatever happened, the truth must be kept from Rick and Viola. Father Cleever or the fathers here at The Oratory, she knew, would help and advise her better than anyone; but she could hardly go to a priest with her troubles, until she'd talked to Henry and heard what he had to say, and, more important still, what he intended to do. It wasn't that Mary doubted Sylvia's story: unhappily, the facts she put forward as evidence, and her knowledge of Henry's background, were sufficient to prove it was true. At the same time, she mustn't act hastily: a situation like this always called for discretion on the part of the wife—or so Mary had been told. And feeling a little calmer now, she decided that to show anger and quarrel with Henry would do no good, but only make things worse, and probably strengthen his love for the girl.

Meanwhile, she could, perhaps, go and see Giles, and tell him—not everything, of course—just that she was worried about Henry's silly infatuation for a child young enough to be his daughter. After all, Giles was her brother as well as a priest; it would certainly be an enormous comfort to have his advice, and share the trouble with a member of her own family.

Giles had a church now in Moorgate. Mary wasn't quite sure how to get to it, having, on her previous visits, always gone with Henry in the car. But she could ask Hadley which bus to take—he'd probably know; or, better still, go by taxi. It would be the easiest and quickest way, and the most comfortable. Wait though

Hadn't Giles said something in his last letter about going away? Yes; of course. Mary remembered, then, he was giving a week's Mission at a church up north . . . either Leeds or Manchester—Giles seemed to spend his life giving Missions—so she couldn't see him after all, and perhaps it was just as well. Whatever Henry had done, she was still his wife, and, as such, owed him loyalty however much he'd wronged, and been disloyal to her. Distraught and overwrought, she might so easily have told Giles the whole story, and she didn't want anyone to know that—at least—not yet; not until it became absolutely necessary, and all hope of her regaining Henry's love was at an end.

The streets were quiet now: only an occasional car or lorry went past; the windows in the other flats were curtained and dark, except for one brilliantly lighted room where a party of young people were dancing to a radiogram. Round and round they went, and Mary, watching them, recognized the couples as they reappeared from time to time. But soon the rhythm of the distant music made her drowsy, and presently she fell into an uneasy sleep—to dream that she was home again; with Henry holding her in his arms and saying tenderly: "My darling, don't cry. I love you. It's all a terrible mistake about Sylvia, and my wanting a divorce."

She smiled in her sleep; and the dream had been so vivid that upon waking she could feel Henry close to her, and still hear his voice speaking those comforting words, until memory returned, bringing its bitter and cruel heartbreak, and the contrast between the dream and reality was almost more than she could bear. Mary, in truth, had come to the end of effort. She couldn't face up to things—she hadn't the will to live, and

thought: "If only I could die." But, to wish for death was cowardly: and since cowardice had not been, and never would be, one of Mary's failings, she forced herself, at last, to get up and dress, conscious all the time of a terrible weakness assailing her which, no doubt, was due to the fact that she had eaten nothing since yesterday afternoon.

Feeling that food would choke her, Mary, nevertheless, switched on the electric kettle, and made some toast, managing in the end to swallow a small piece of the latter and drink two cups of tea. She was just finishing the last, when her bell rang; and going to the door, after a moment's hesitation, she found Hadley outside with a letter in his hand.

He said: "Good morning, Mrs. Delair. Sorry to disturb you, but a young lady brought this note about an hour ago and asked me to let you have it as soon as possible. I told her that wouldn't before half-past eight, as you'd probably be asleep, and she said that'd be all right.

"Well—thank you very much, Hadley." Mary took the letter; then, looking down at the cat—an enormous tabby with a sleek and shining coat—arching itself around Hadley's legs, she added: "I see you still have Bengie."

"Yes, madam, indeed." Hadley smiled, showing two rows of glistening and brand-new teeth. "And he's grown, don't you think? It's amazing, too, how he follows me around. Won't stay down in the basement if I'm above stairs. Cats is sociable, though, and friendly-like; only you've got to treat 'em right. And talk to the little dears! Bengie, now, understands every word I say to him. Don't you, my handsome? Hey, old man!"

"I'm sure he does." Mary stooped to stroke Bengie,

who thrust his big soft face into her hand and nuzzled it affectionately. "Cats are so clever. We lost ours, you know, just before Christmas. He picked up poison. It was dreadfully sad. We feel, somehow, we can't have another—at least—not yet."

"Ah! I can understand that. But you will, madam. You wait. A house don't feel the same without a pussy-cat, once you've had one. I'll be getting along, now, Mrs. Delair. You found everything satisfactory in the flat, I hope?"

"Yes; thank you, Hadley. Quite all right."

"And Dr. Delair? And the young lady and gentleman—I trust they're in good health?"

"Yes," Mary said again: and added: "I shall be leaving soon after half-past ten, Hadley, so if you happen to be in the hall and spot a taxi, will you get hold of it for me?"

"Certainly, madam. There are usually plenty about at this time. I'll see you has one." He put Bengie up on his shoulder and was gone the next second, disappearing as he always did, like a ghost; and Mary, closing the door, went back to her sitting-room.

Knowing from whom the letter came, Mary waited a moment, looking at her own name on the envelope, thinking of the girl who had written it, who must often have pictured herself as the second Mrs. Delair. Well, she knew better now: whatever happened, Sylvia Crayle would never be Sylvia Delair; and ripping open the envelope, Mary drew out a thick piece of paper, though at first she had been half inclined to tear the whole thing up unread.

There was only yesterday's date and an added 11 p.m. at the top of the page, and the letter started off without the usual prefatory words, which, Mary

supposed, was only to be expected since neither she nor Miss Crayle had any reason to call each other "Dear". Sylvia, however, knew exactly what she wanted to say, and the crudity of her language, quite apart from the things she threatened, shocked Mary into a state almost bordering on despair.

"I might have known", Sylvia stated, in her slightly backhand writing, "that you would refuse to divorce your husband, even though it means his happiness, because women like you only think of themselves. I suppose, now, the first thing you'll do when you get back, is to tell Gerrard that I came to the flat, and drag a promise out of him never to see me again. I can imagine what a scene there'll be, and the kind of person you'll say I am, and how you'll enjoy doing it! But I'm warning you—you'd better be careful; because, if you make trouble and come between us, I'll kill myself! I shouldn't want to go on living without Gerrard. And you'll be responsible for my death, and have it on your conscience—always. I shall leave a letter, too, for the Coroner, so that he'll know the truth. You'll like having it read out to the jury, won't you? What a nice juicy bit of scandal for your husband's grand friends, when they hear about his love affair with me! Perhaps you'll feel sorry then. And I shouldn't go to the police with this letter if I were you. I could make things very unpleasant for everyone if you did. Anyway—don't say I haven't warned you; and you'd be wise to think again, because I mean every word I've said.

SYLVIA CRAYLE."

Mary folded the letter and put it back in the envelope, meticulously and with great care; then aware that she was shaking from head to foot, sank into a chair. Her first thought was to wonder how she could

ever have felt a spark of pity for this girl, and the next—that Sylvia had the power to discredit Henry in the eyes of his friends, and do him a serious injury. She was, too, Mary felt sure, quite capable of carrying out her threats—not, perhaps to the extent of killing herself, though she might, Mary thought, suddenly panic-stricken, and recalling Sylvia's avowals of love, even do that. One frequently came across cases in the paper of people shooting and gassing themselves; and, if the victims were women, the tragedy, more often than not, was caused by an unhappy love affair.

It had happened to others, so why not to Sylvia? The unfortunate girl appeared to have no sense of right or wrong: she was just the type, Mary felt, to end everything, once she had lost hope. One could imagine her taking an overdose of sleeping pills, and slipping peacefully out of life, and she, Mary, would be to blame. Not only that, Henry was involved . . . he couldn't avoid censure. As Sylvia pointed out, the truth would be known to his friends, and told in the more sensational newspapers.

Mary, her panic increasing, as she pictured the story carrying headlines across every front page, got up and paced the room; thinking first of the children, then of Henry's mother, and what the shame and disgrace would mean to them; telling herself that she must be calm and reason things out, yet knowing she was powerless against the weapon Sylvia had used. She must have realized how deadly it was, and that threatened exposure would make Mary keep silence, and stop her from saying a word to Henry, or even bringing the subject up, because the risk was too great—a risk, Mary knew, which she dared not take. But what . . . dear God in Heaven . . . what was she to do! Divorce could not

even be contemplated: it was out of the question. People like Henry and herself, who regarded the marriage vow as binding, remained husband and wife for life, and only death could part them. And to confront Henry with the truth and insist upon his giving Sylvia up, would, if her threats were serious, involve every member of the family in a ghastly and sordid tragedy. How would Rick and Viola react to hearing and seeing their father's name coupled with Sylvia Crayle's? And worse . . . oh! so much worse . . . to the knowledge that his carelessness and neglect had driven the girl in a moment of desperation to take her own life? Mary closed her eyes. No . . . anything rather than that. She must go on as usual . . . hide what she was feeling and keep the grief and pain to herself. And wait . . . just wait patiently for things to right themselves, and pray that Henry might come back to her.

Chapter Seven

IT was strange, Mary thought, how shock made everything appear a little unreal. Getting out of the taxi at Paddington and walking on to the platform, she felt almost as though she had been drugged. The hurrying and jostling crowds, even the train as it came sliding in, had a dream-like quality; and as she followed a porter along to a first-class compartment and thanked and tipped the man, she seemed to be walking and talking in her sleep.

There were other people in the carriage—two men and a large, rather flashy-looking woman; and Mary wondered if they could see she had been crying, since all three eyed her with the deepest suspicion, or so she imagined; until the stout lady smiled quite pleasantly, and one of the men offered to close his window if she felt a draught. He added: "I suppose we do stop at Chippenham?" But before anyone could reply, his question was answered by the loudspeaker announcing that the Bristol, Bath and Taunton train would depart from platform one, with Chippenham its first stop. Added to which, a porter came along, slamming doors and calling out: "Bristol and Bath. First stop Chippenham . . . Chippenham first stop," in a voice loud enough to be heard above the roar of engines and escape of steam.

There was the usual last-minute rush by late-comers

to find seats, and a thin old woman resembling a fierce and bad-tempered eagle, pulled down the window of the next-door compartment and beckoned imperiously, with a claw-like, bejewelled hand, to an individual, distraught and dressed in black, carrying two umbrellas and a dressing-case, who came hurrying up to the door, saying breathlessly: "I'm sorry, m'lady. I've only just been able to get the tickets; there was such a crowd in front of me at the booking office," in answer to the old woman's: "Where *have* you been, Simnot? D'you realize that you very nearly missed the train?"

Mary's companions exchanged significant glances; and the younger of the two men remarked, that people who could afford to keep a lady's maid these days were lucky. All his wife had was a woman four times a week to help with the cleaning, and that came expensive enough, since she wanted four shillings an hour, plus insurance, not to mention her food: to all of which the others agreed — at the same time noting Mary's silence, and summing her up as being a bit stand-offish and evidently the kind of person who didn't encourage strangers to talk.

Actually, Mary was pretending to read a magazine, not because she felt unfriendly, but just too sad at heart to speak or enter into a conversation with anyone. She kept thinking how different this journey was to yesterday's, when she had started off so happily, secure in Henry's love; knowing their parting was only for a few brief hours and that she would very soon be back with him again. And now she was on her way. The train slid smoothly through Ealing Broadway, rocking a little as it gathered speed; past other small stations, catching a glimpse of the Thames, blue and sunlit, where little white boats bobbed about and strained at their ropes—

then the rosy, fairy-tale tower of Windsor Castle between the trees; all so heartbreakingly beautiful, Mary thought, closing her eyes—wishing, uselessly that the day had been overcast, to match her mood of grey despondency.

But as the train rushed on, lessening at the rate of one per minute the miles which lay between Henry and herself, Mary's panic returned. How was she going to meet him and keep silent? Could she speak naturally, as though nothing had happened. Wouldn't it, after all, be wiser to ask Henry for the truth and hear it from his own lips? True, Sylvia had threatened things too dreadful even to contemplate, but mightn't they, in some way or another, be circumvented? If only she were sure of Henry's loyalty, and knew for certain that she would have his support, everything could be put right; because they would stand together, and what more powerful unity was there, than that between husband and wife? If . . . if only . . . the rhythm of the train seemed to be beating out the words; with every turn of the wheels she was drawing nearer and still nearer to Henry and home.

They were at Chippenham now: the younger man, wishing them all a very good afternoon, got out of the train, and, as it steamed away from the station, Mary caught sight of the eagle-faced old woman standing on the platform giving directions to her maid, Sinnot, and a chauffeur in immaculate uniform.

Upon reaching Bath, Mary barely waited for the train to stop, but was out of it and half-way across the bridge before the other passengers had time to get their cases off the rack. Somebody she knew might have travelled down from London, and she didn't want to run into any of her friends . . . she couldn't face them—

at least, not yet--and having just caught what everyone in Oakbridge called "the local", Mary sank back on her seat with a sigh of relief, knowing she was safe, since the only other travellers besides herself turned out to be old Farmer Johns, who was right up at the other end of the car and fathoms deep in sleep.

But, as luck would have it, the first person Mary saw on Oakbridge station was Mrs. Taplow, who naturally wanted to hear all the news, and what Mary had done in London, and whether she had bought any exciting clothes. And to make matters worse, when they got to the barrier, Mary realized, that the return half of her ticket had been from Paddington to Bath, and she'd forgotten to buy another one. That, however, was soon put right, just by paying the single fare to Oakbridge: but the car! She'd also forgotten the car . . . it was still in the garage at Bath, waiting to be picked up on her return. Fool! fool! not to remember. She could have driven straight to Prior's Oak and avoided this meeting with Mrs. Taplow, who already was looking at her a little strangely and asking: "What's the matter, Mary? Have you forgotten your bag?"

"No; no. It's all right. I can't think, though, how I . . . no . . . don't worry. It's of no importance."

"Well," said Mrs. Taplow, only half-satisfied, "I just wondered. Anyway--if you're sure you haven't left anything behind. . . . How are you getting home? Is Henry meeting you with the car?"

"No; I'm walking. I shall enjoy the air, after being stuffed up in a train."

"But, Mary!" Mrs. Taplow sounded even more surprised. "You can't walk from here to Prior's Oak. It's much too far. Why not take the bus? We can go together."

"Oh yes! Of course. I was forgetting. . . . I mean . . ."

"What you mean", Mrs. Taplow said, firmly, "is that you're overtired, my dear." She took Mary by the arm and walked her out to the sunny little station yard. "Actually, you look like death. There are shadows under your eyes, which means, I suppose, you had a bad night. It's the same with me. The first night I'm in London I don't sleep a wink. The traffic keeps me awake, until I get used to it."

Mary stood still for a moment, conscious again of that terrible weakness stealing over her. She said at last: "I think I'd better have a taxi. Mr. Fawdry's over there with his car. I wonder if he's free. I'll go and ask him."

But Mr. Fawdry, who never missed anything, had already guessed her need, and getting out of his big Austin, opened the door deferentially, saying: "Will it be Little Court, Mrs. Delair?"

Mary said: "Yes, please, Mr. Fawdry; and stop at Mrs. Taplow's house on the way, unless"—she turned to Mrs. Taplow—"is that all right, Carrie? You don't want to be dropped anywhere in the village?"

"No; I was going straight home," said Mrs. Taplow; and sinking into the soft cushions, she added: "Well, this is very nice." Then, as Mr. Fawdry drove out of the yard: "I like being taken around by you, Mary; one can always be sure of such luxury! But apart from that, I'm glad you had the sense to hire a car. You looked as though you might faint, a moment or two ago, and really frightened me. Do try, dear, if you can, to have a rest before Henry gets home, otherwise the poor man will be worried to death, and send urgent messages for Dr. Fabian to come at once."

Mary assured her that she was perfectly all right,

except for being a little tired; but Mrs. Taplow's suggestion, that Henry would be anxious and distraught, as behoved a devoted husband, was so directly opposed to the truth, and what Mary knew or imagined his real feelings to be, that a sudden and overwhelming bitterness was added to her grief. She doubted, since all his concern and tenderness were for another woman, now, whether Henry would even notice her pale cheeks, or take the trouble to ask her how she was, but if he did, it would merely be a formal and courteous inquiry which any stranger might make.

Mrs. Taplow, noticing her silence and wondering what could have happened to make Mary look so sad, kept up a light and casual conversation as they went along, thinking it might help if she did most of the talking herself. She said, then: "I meant to tell you, Mary, and nearly forgot. Our girls are coming home tomorrow; I heard from Alice this morning—you'll probably find Viola's letter waiting for you—unless she hasn't bothered to write. They seem to have enjoyed themselves, but Alice says Cousin Emmie has suddenly gone all out for the Hay Diet, whatever that is, and she feels for Viola's sake, quite apart from her own, that they'll be wise to come away while the going's good."

Mary said: "Oh!" Then, making an effort, added: "You'll be glad to have Alice back, won't you?"

"I shall indeed." Mrs. Taplow sighed. "I've missed her terribly. And I imagine you will be just as pleased to see Viola again. It makes such a difference to have young people about a house."

Mary agreed, though actually she had been comforting herself with the thought of Viola's absence, because she knew it would be harder to hide the truth from her daughter than anyone else. Viola was peculiarly sensi-

tive to atmosphere, and could detect grief and unhappiness in another person—particularly her mother—almost at once: nor would she rest until she'd discovered the cause of it. Viola, then, was the one from whom she had the most to fear; Viola, with her wide, clear-eyed gaze; her disconcerting habit of sensing trouble, and passion for getting at the truth.

Mary was still asking herself how she could reassure the child, and make her believe that nothing had gone wrong, when, having put Mrs. Taplow down at her house, they drove over the Green and turned in at the gates of Little Court, and for the first time in twenty years Mary dreaded entering her home.

Mrs. Delair who was lying on her invalid chair in the sunny porch, wondered who could be arriving in Mr. Fawdry's car; seeing it was her daughter-in-law, she smiled and waved a greeting, and waited until Mr. Fawdry had been paid and sent around to the kitchens to get a cup of tea; when, taking Mary's hand and returning her kiss, she said:

"Well, here you are, dear; back again safe and sound," and added: "But what happened? Did the car break down? I thought you garaged it in Bath and meant to drive home from there.

"Yes; I know. That's what I intended to do." Mary flushed. "Only I forgot. I mean . . . everything was such a rush; and it wasn't until we got to Oakbridge, I remembered I'd left the car behind."

Mrs. Delair thought this over. Then she laughed. She said: "It all sounds highly suspicious, Mary—at least, it might to anyone who didn't know you. Fortunately, I do; otherwise, I should say you'd been enjoying yourself, and having a gay old time in London, and suffering from the after effects."

"No," said Mary, "nothing like that." The swift colour had faded, leaving her strangely pale. "Anyway—there's no harm done. The car's perfectly safe, and Henry can go in tomorrow and fetch it. Or if not tomorrow, when he has time."

"Yes, of course. And that reminds me, dear. Henry rang up just after lunch. He asked if we'd heard what train you were coming by, and said he probably wouldn't be home until ten to half-past—even later, perhaps. Hetty spoke to him and put the message down. It's on your desk in the drawing-room."

For a moment, Mary remained perfectly silent and still, knowing, now, where Henry would be and with whom, whenever he told her, either directly or over the telephone, that he must stay on at the Station owing to an extra pressure of work. Did he really think she was such a fool as to believe a story like that! As though a man in his position couldn't just walk out, and come home when he wanted to!

And in which small country town, she wondered, would he and Sylvia meet this time? In what obscure little café would they sit, side by side, pretending to eat a meal—talking feverishly with their eyes on the clock, knowing there was so much to be said and so little time in which to say it?

Suddenly and, she realized, unwisely, but unable to help herself, Mary said: "You know. Mother, these late nights of Henry's are getting me down. This is—what—the fourth or fifth time it's happened in less than two months. For the little I see of my husband, I might just as well not have one at all!"

Mrs. Delair looked surprised and rather distressed. She said: "I can understand how you feel, dear, but I'm sure Henry dislikes it quite as much as you do,

‘Actually, I believe they’ve had some very important personage with them yesterday and today. Henry mentioned it in passing, because, if you’d been home, he would have asked the man to dinner last night. As it was, they both went over to Dr. Biggs, and spent the whole evening talking ‘shop’. At least, I imagine they did! You know what these scientists are, Mary, when they get together; and we must remember that their job carries an enormous and, to me, frightening responsibility.”

“Yes, I suppose it does.” Mary spoke listlessly. She asked then: “When is this V.I.P. going back? Or has the wretched man already gone?”

“No; not yet. I was about to tell you, dear,” Mrs. Delair said, mildly, “only you didn’t give me the chance. He’s catching a plane tonight; and I imagine—I don’t know, of course, but it seems likely—that Henry will go to the airport to see him off.”

“Oh well, in that case . . .” Mary left the sentence unfinished, but she looked, her mother-in-law thought, much happier and less anxious than she had a moment or two ago, but still so pale and weary that Mrs. Delair said:

“You must be dying for some tea, Mary, and I’m having mine downstairs today. You’ll have to wheel me into the drawing-room; it’s Jane’s afternoon off, and Hetty can’t seem to manage this chair very well. And whilst we’re drinking our tea,” Mrs. Delair added comfortably, “you can tell me all the news, and what you did with yourself; after seeing Mr. Vyvian, I mean. Henry and I had quite an argument as to how you would spend the evening. I saw you going off to a theatre, and he felt sure you’d stay in the flat.”

“Well,” Mary said, quietly, “he was right. I did.”

2

By the time Mary had gone upstairs and unpacked her suitcase, then down again to see Cookie in the kitchen and talk over a few domestic affairs, her fears had subsided, and it seemed so natural to be home that she wondered why she should have dreaded coming back. Reading Henry's message which Hetty had written down and put on her desk, Mary saw that "Dr. Delair was sorry, but he couldn't get home until around about half-past ten," so, presumably, Henry, wishing to be polite, had *said* he was sorry even if he were nothing of the sort. Amongst the pile of letters there was also a card from Viola, saying that the flags could be put out as she was coming back on Thursday, which, of course, Mary already knew; nor did it disturb her unduly, since, being more in control of both the situation and herself, she felt it would be possible now to deal with Viola's probings, and fend her daughter off.

But the problem of what to say and how to behave to Henry still remained; and as the hours slipped by, with darkness falling and turning evening into night, Mary grew restless, thinking first of his absence as a reprieve, then longing for him to return, so that they could get their first meeting over, which, actually, was what she dreaded most.

It must have been about eleven o'clock when she heard a car draw up, and, above the purring of its running engine, a man's voice say: "Thank you very much, sir. Good night."

Then Henry's: "Good night, Philips. Sorry you've had such a late journey," which meant he'd been

brought home by one of the official drivers, so perhaps—no, definitely—he hadn't met Sylvia this evening.

The whole of Mary's being seemed to be in her ears as she lay waiting and listening for Henry's step on the stairs; and when at last it came, she suddenly felt weak and faint, and powerless to move or even speak. Then her door opened very gently, and Henry tiptoed into the room. He said, whispering the words:

"Are you awake, Mary?" and, dissembling, she answered, sleepily: "Yes; but only just. Don't, please, put on the light."

"No, I won't. I wanted to know if you were back safely, that's all; and to say I was sorry not to be here when you arrived."

Mary said stupidly: "Well, I am back; and quite all right; only very tired. I didn't get any sleep last night."

"How was that?" Henry sat down on a corner of the bed and reached for her hand, but Mary drew it away. He said then: "I won't worry you. Poor darling, I can tell you're all in. And it proves you shouldn't go junketing off to London on your own."

"I didn't junket," Mary said, starkly. "If you must know, I stayed in the flat and wished myself dead!"

Henry said: "Oh!" He got up and walked to the window; adding as he came back and stood over her: "Settle down now, my dear, and have a good night's rest; and lie on a bit in the morning. I've got to be up extra specially early, but I shan't disturb you. I'll sleep in my dressing-room." He spoke calmly and reasonably, just, Mary thought, as a man would who was trying to be patient with an hysterical wife, for whom he felt a kindly affection, but didn't really love.

"Henry!" Tears thickened Mary's voice, and there was a pleading note in it. "Henry, I beg you—don't go

off tomorrow without seeing me. I mean . . . you're away so much, and I never seem to get the chance to speak to you now. Couldn't we . . ." She faltered. . . . "I'd like to go away, Henry, if only for a week. Just the two of us. Can't you even manage that?"

"No," Henry said, decisively, "it's quite impossible, Mary—at least, later on I might, but not now. As for never seeing me, you're talking rubbish. I admit, things have been a bit sticky these last few weeks. Today, for instance, I couldn't get away. We've had a man over from the States; and Biggs and I, in courtesy, went to see him off at the airport. He was flying to Paris, first, and getting a plane on from there."

"Yes, I know. Mother told me. Oh, never mind, Henry! It doesn't matter." Mary turned her head wearily on the pillow; and Henry, after a moment's hesitation, bent down and kissed her cheek, saying a little awkwardly: "Try and sleep, dear. And be sure to call me, if you want anything. I'll leave the door open, then I shall hear you right away."

Yes, she could call, but to what purpose, when all she wanted was the assurance of Henry's love and the comfort of his arms around her? If she asked for the one and expected the other, he would be forced to admit the truth or tell her a lie, and Mary felt she hadn't the strength to stand up to either, having already gone through as much as she was able to bear.

So she said: "I shan't need anything. You can close the door: I shall probably go right off to sleep."

And Henry, still speaking rather awkwardly, said: "I expect you will," and went into his dressing-room, wondering what Mary had on her mind, and whether—which God forbid—she'd stumbled upon the truth or heard rumours of it from somebody, whilst in London

yesterday. He lay for a while, trying to keep awake so as to hear if she called, but tiredness overcame him and presently he slept, dreamlessly and without stirring, until seven o'clock the next morning when Hetty brought him his tea.

He said: "Good heavens! Is it that time? I must have breakfast at half-past seven, Hetty. Will you tell Mrs. Traile?" Then: "Is your mistress awake?"

"Yes, sir; I've just taken in her tea. She seems . . ." Hetty flushed. "I beg your pardon, sir, but the mistress doesn't look very well, to me."

Henry dismissed both Hetty and her fears by saying Mrs. Delair would probably stay in bed, as all she needed was a little rest; then, harassed because he was late, and feeling more worried than he cared to admit, hurried into the bedroom to find out what was amiss.

He said: "Are you all right, Mary? Hetty told me . . ."

"I know; I heard her. She shouldn't have bothered you. There was no necessity. I'm perfectly well."

"You're sure? Look, Mary, I haven't a moment to spare—I got up late—but if you want to speak to me about anything . . ."

"I don't. I've changed my mind. In any case, it would take too long, and I should hate to detain you when you're so rushed. Oh, by the way—Viola's coming back today."

"I know. I read her card. And I'll get back early this evening, I promise, if it's humanly possible."

"That", Mary said, carefully, "will be very nice and quite a change. We may expect you to dinner, then?"

"Of course; definitely. Unless I ring up." Henry rumbled his hair; and taking an agonized look at the clock, made a dash for the bathroom and turned on

both the taps, but he didn't, Mary noticed, start to whistle and sing, which, with Henry, was always a bad sign, and, in this case, probably meant that he'd connected her cold and distant manner with his own guilty secret, and was wondering how much she knew or guessed of the truth.

At the moment, however, had she but known it, Henry's thoughts were on his job, and his mind completely taken up with the notes he'd made last night, and certain facts which he intended to bring forward at the next conference. But, as soon as he finished breakfast, he went along to the south wing to see his mother, who, hearing Jane say: "Well, Mrs. Delair is awake, only it is rather early . . ." called out:

"Come in, Henry. I'm still in bed, of course, and not exactly looking my best, but I don't mind you." She added, as he bent down to kiss her: "What is it, my dear? You've never called on me at this unearthly hour of the morning before."

"I know; and I can only stay a second now. I wonder, Mother"—Henry hesitated—"it's Mary . . . she isn't a bit like herself. She seems frightfully overwrought and on edge."

"On edge? Do you mean irritable or nervy?"

"Well, actually, both. Something, obviously, has upset her and I must find out what that something is. I've a very good reason for wanting to know."

Mrs. Delair thought this over for a moment. Then she said: "I suppose you wouldn't like to tell me what that reason is?"

"No," Henry's answer was decisive, but he added quickly: "I'm sorry, Mother, I can't."

"You mean you won't. All right; only if you are appealing for help, you oughtn't to keep me in the

dark. Is there any real need for all this mystery? What could be upsetting Mary? Or should I have said, 'who'? I suppose"—Mrs. Delair hesitated—"Ricky isn't in trouble."

"Rick? Good lord, no! He went off as jolly as a sand-boy. Besides, if he ever wants help, Rick knows he can come to me."

"Well, that's very nice for him, my dear. I wish all sons were in the same position, and all fathers like you. I was merely trying to find out why Mary should be worried; and knowing what a devoted mother she is, I thought one of the children may—I say may because it's so unlikely—be causing her some anxiety."

"The children", Henry said, "are fine. Nothing wrong with either of them. Viola, of course, is a bit of a minx; but she's an attractive minx and a warm-hearted child. Added to which, this business has only just cropped up, actually since Mary went to London. She was perfectly all right before; and I'm wondering whether she met a friend or ran into somebody. . . ."

"Really, Henry!" his mother's laugh interrupted him. "Considering the size of London's population, Mary must have run up against more than one person; but I can assure you that apart from Mr. Vyvian and people like taxi-drivers and porters, she didn't speak to a soul. I asked her," Mrs. Delair went on after a little pause, "if she'd seen anything of Giles or gone shopping, and she said, no, there wasn't time. Apparently, Mr. Vyvian kept her hanging about; and you know how that man talks! And having finished with him, I gathered Mary went back to the flat and routed around for some kind of a meal, and then went off to bed. So it can't be anything to do with her going to London; that's quite obvious."

"I suppose not." Henry sounded a little dubious. "What you've been saying may be true, Mother . . . it's reasonable enough . . . and I don't for one moment think you're just trying to make the best of things to set my mind at rest. But the fact remains: Mary is behaving very oddly, and I wish to heaven I knew why."

"Then you'll just have to ask her. It's the only way of satisfying yourself. Or are you, by any chance, hoping I'll do it for you? Is that why you've come rushing up here to me?"

"Well, yes. It'll come better from you, Mother. Just find out tactfully if there's anything on her mind, and let me know."

Mrs. Delair thought for a moment. Then she said: "No, Henry, I'm not coming into this. I make it a rule never to interfere between a husband and wife. It's a fatal thing to do. Personally, I think you're letting your imagination run away with you. I admit, Mary looked rather pale and tired when she came back yesterday, and I know she was disappointed at not finding you here to welcome her, but apart from that, she seemed perfectly all right, and I'm quite sure, dear, you have nothing to worry about. I suppose," Mrs. Delair went on after a little pause, "you've never stopped to think how lucky you are not to have a temperamental wife? Well"—as Henry made no answer—"you should. Some women are everlastingly throwing scenes, just because they feel like it, and that's a thing Mary has never done in all the years she's been married to you."

"I know," Henry agreed, "that's why I'm worried now."

"Because the poor darling has let herself go for once? Don't be silly, Henry! If Mary is irritable, which I very much doubt, it's probably due to overtiredness; and

there really is no need for you to get so worked up and make all this fuss—especially as your own conscience is clear. I mean, supposing, for instance, you had wronged Mary in any way, or even if you were trying to hide something from her, you might begin to worry, then, because you'd be wondering all the time if she suspected, and never have a moment's peace."

Henry went scarlet. He said, lamely: "No; I don't expect I should," adding, as Jane came in with Mrs. Delair's breakfast tray: "All right, Mother; let's forget it," and hurried out of the room.

Chapter Eight

H E was gone so quickly that Mrs. Delair felt a little bewildered, and began to wonder what it had all been about. Why should Henry rush in just to tell her Mary seemed nervy and on edge, and ask his mother to find out what was wrong, when he could so easily do it himself; and would have, too, if he'd had a ha-porth of sense, and then dash out again, leaving everything in the air, and nobody any the wiser as to why he'd mentioned the matter at all? Mrs. Delair thought it was very odd, and hoped that Henry wasn't going in for whimsies of his own, and turning into the kind of man who resented a wife having any kind of character, preferring her to be a meek and "patient Griselda", and ready to obey him in everything.

All the same, when Mary came into the room, she took a quick look at her daughter-in-law, knowing that people often gave themselves away by their expression; and still more, by their manner and tone of voice, but Mary appeared to be her usual self—quite tranquil and at ease—and certainly not the least bit irritable.

She said: "How are you, Mother dear? I really came to say that I'm going into Bath to fetch the car. I thought I'd get away early, so as to be here when Viola arrives. Is there anything you want brought from Bath?"

"Well, I wouldn't mind a tin of Oliver biscuits, if you're going to Fortt's; and some of their liqueur chocolates. You'd better bring me a two-pound box, I think, Mary. They're Viola's favourites. Have them put down to my account, will you, dear?"

"Yes; all right. Nothing else?"

"No. There was a book I thought might interest me—they reviewed it on the wireless last week, but I can't remember the author's name. My head is getting awful! I just forget everything. I don't know whether it's a sign of old age or pure laziness. A little of both, I expect, in my case. What did Henry say when he heard you'd left the car in Bath?" Mrs. Delair asked, casually.

"I didn't tell him. My memory must be as bad as yours, Mother." Mary smiled fleetingly. "I forgot to mention it. He wouldn't have had the time to listen, anyway." She paused, then added: "I want to catch the half-past nine bus from Oakbridge if I can, so I'll have to hurry. Are you coming down to the garden later on, Mother? It's a perfectly lovely day."

"I don't think I will, dear. I can't be bothered, especially now Henry's gone off, and there's nobody to help Jane with my chair. Neither Hetty nor Cookie are really strong enough. And, Mary!" Mrs. Delair called, just as the door was closing: "Drive carefully, won't you?"

Mary said: "Yes, of course. I always do. I'm not all that keen to smash myself up, Mother," knowing she must reassure her mother-in-law, but with visions of herself pinned under the wrecked car, and tormented by doubts as to how Henry would react to the news of her death.

She dismissed the thought, however, almost as soon as it had formed in her mind, realizing that she was

merely giving way to self-pity, and also, what she had been imagining wasn't likely to happen to her or the car. And later in the morning, driving through the congested streets of Bath, slowing up and braking automatically at traffic lights, taking corners cautiously, and keeping a watchful eye on other cars, Mary thought: "Nobody really wants to die. I don't, myself, otherwise I shouldn't be driving like this. I'd speed and take risks, not caring whether I came through safely or not. Which means, I suppose, self-preservation is inherent in us all, and life is still sweet, no matter how much grief and suffering we have to bear."

It was then that she saw Tommy Fraser standing at a bus stop, so drawing into the kerb and lowering the window, she called out: "D'you want a lift, Tommy? I'm on my way home."

"Good gracious! Is it you, Mrs. Delair!" Tommy came up to the door. "Are you sure you've got room for me?"

"Yes, of course. The car's empty. Get in, Tommy. I'm awfully glad I spotted you."

"So am I. This is certainly my lucky day." Tommy settled himself in the seat by her. "I came in on the early bus . . . had to see my doctor." He touched his good eye. "A spot of trouble there."

"Really, Tommy?" Mary's voice was gentle. "But nothing serious, I hope."

"He didn't say. I'll probably have to go into hospital, and let them probe and mess around with it. Now, if only it'd been the other one—the one I call my Nelson—I could have left that at the hospital, and let them get on with the job. As it is, I suppose they'll keep me in bed, tied up like a mummy with bandages and lord knows what."

Mary said nothing: there was nothing to say, except: "I'm sorry, Tommy," and sympathy, she knew, was the last thing he wanted or would ever ask of anyone.

They had left the city now, and Tommy was looking out of the window at the green fields and flower-filled gardens, and distant range of hills, almost, Mary thought, as though he knew, that very soon he wouldn't be able to see them, and wished to imprint their beauty on his mind. The possibility that this boy might go blind was so terrible that Mary, feeling her throat contract with tears, dared not contemplate it. She stole a glance at his face, the side nearest to her—the sad, disfigured face, patched and glazed with its fixed, parrot-like eye. Her heart was wrung. She could have wept openly; but instead, she said: "Alice and Viola are coming home today, Tommy. Did you know?"

"Yes; I'm glad, aren't you? As for Mrs. Taplow, she's ready to jump over the moon. I think she's been awfully lonely without Alice. But then, Alice is the kind of girl you would miss; I've missed her badly, myself."

He went on hurriedly, before Mary could comment on this: "We naturally see quite a lot of each other, living next door, and I suppose that's how we've become such good friends;" then added abruptly: "Mrs. Delair, may I tell you something?"

Mary, rather surprised, said: "Yes, Tommy. Why not?"

"Well, I don't know, except that confidences can be awfully boring at times. As a matter of fact I want your advice. Do you think," Tommy asked, starkly, "I've a right to fall in love; and, that if I offered marriage to a girl, there'd be the slightest chance of her accepting me? And don't bother to wrap things up, Mrs. Delair. I'm not sensitive. Anyone who goes around looking as

I do can't afford to be. I always imagine people must think I've strayed out of Madame Tussauds; and the Chamber of Horrors at that."

Mary said, calmly: "Now, you're just being utterly ridiculous, Tommy. And you'll take back what you said, otherwise I shan't even answer you."

Tommy grinned. "All right. As we were. I'm an Adonis! Is that better?"

"No, worse. Sillier still! Oh, Tommy, my dear! Look . . ." Mary broke off, knowing the tears were dangerously near; "there are some cigarettes in that pocket. Give me one and help yourself. This occasion calls for something." She leant forward towards his lighter, slowing down the car. "As for falling in love, what's the use of asking me whether you should, when you're already fathoms deep? And it's Alice, of course. Am I right?"

"Yes." Tommy seemed to have lost his shyness. "What ought I to do, Mrs. Delair? You see, I believe she does like me quite a lot. Sometimes, I think she's . . . well . . ."

Mary nodded. "In love with you. That doesn't surprise me at all. You're a very lovable person Tommy. And as Alice is a darling, besides being a most sensible girl, it seems to me that you're two very lucky people. In fact, Tommy, I can, from my heart, congratulate you both."

Tommy thought for a moment. He said at last: "You do honestly think, then, we could get married . . . that it will be all right and not caddish to go ahead and ask Alice? You know—I'm terrified she'll say 'yes' out of pity. I don't want Alice or any girl to marry me out of pity. It would be nothing short of hell. And another thing—if I'm going to lose my sight, then—it's the end.

When I'm blind, Joe can tote me around; not a wife."

Mary said, matter-of-factly: "Well, that's for you to decide; but personally, I don't believe you are going blind, Tommy; and my advice is, get married and leave the future to take care of itself. Besides, you're forgetting Alice. Oughtn't she, in fairness, to be given the chance of devoting herself to you? Which, I'm sure, she is not only willing but longing to do."

Tommy flushed. "D'you really mean that, Mrs. Delair? It seems . . . well, quite wonderful."

Mary smiled. For a little while, she had put aside her own grief and pain, to meet poor Tommy's exigent demand for guidance and help, and felt now strangely at peace. She drove in silence until they reached the Green; then, stopping the car a few yards from his house, leant back with her hands stretched out and resting lightly on the steering wheel.

She said: "What I've been trying to tell you is that nothing matters if people really love each other. That's marriage, Tommy: a true marriage, I mean; and as long as you and Alice feel you can bear whatever troubles come along, you've no need to worry. Just being together will keep you happy, and you'll be able to face up to anything."

Tommy said: "Yes, I understand. And thank you a million times, Mrs. Delair. You've been a tremendous help. I'm terribly grateful. You know—I felt somehow that you'd be the right person to come to for advice."

"Really? I wonder why."

"Well, it's rather hard to explain, and I'm not awfully good at expressing myself, but I can't, for instance, see you ever hanging on to other people's opinions, and being guided by them. I imagine that you'd always think things out for yourself, and stick to

what you believed to be right. Also"—Tommy hesitated—"there was another reason, Mrs. Delair, only you might be offended if I mentioned it. I'm afraid it's rather personal."

"I don't think that need worry you. I'm not easily offended, Tommy. What is this other reason? Anything to do with my character?"

"No; it's just that your own marriage is so wonderful—I mean, you're happy—oh! I can't explain, but you know what I'm getting at! Anyway—I could bank on your sympathy, because you'd be able to enter into my feelings. I'm putting this very badly, Mrs. Delair," Tommy said, a little desperately. "What I'm trying to say is that people who have never been in love don't know a thing about it—how can they?—whereas you do. That's why I was certain you'd understand, and give me the best and soundest advice possible. At least, I knew you wouldn't dismiss love as something entirely unimportant, and talk a lot of bilge about it being like an attack of measles, which most people have to get over at one period of their lives. There are benighted creatures—I've met them—who look upon love as a kind of disease: and, I swear this is true, I once knew a man who called it a virus in the blood! What d'you think of that? Makes you hopping mad, doesn't it?"

Mary smiled, but all she said was: "You need not be so grateful, Tommy. I'm glad to have been of some help; and terribly pleased, of course, that you see in me the perfect example of a happy wife."

Tommy said, earnestly: "Well, I do. And when I spoke of your marriage being such a wonderfully happy one, I was thinking of you both. Dr. Delair is a grand person! Everyone thinks the world of him. You know, people call you the ideal couple. I remember, when I

first came here, somebody—it must have been Mrs. Taplow—told me that the most devoted husband and wife in Prior's Oak were Dr. and Mrs. Delair; and I very soon discovered she was right."

Mary flushed. She said, rather hurriedly: "That's a very nice thing to hear, Tommy. I only hope you're not making it up. I'm sorry, though, I can't stay to listen to any more of your kind remarks. We'd better be on our way."

But Tommy, getting out of the car, said she needn't take the trouble to start and stop again—he'd walk these few yards—adding: "Thank you very much, Mrs. Delair; not only for the lift home, but everything." Which Mary interpreted as meaning the advice she'd given him; and driving on slowly, she wondered whether he would act upon it and propose to Alice at once. Poor Tommy! Like everyone else, she loved him dearly, and prayed for his happiness; at the same time, she had been relieved to hear that it was Alice he wanted to marry, and not, as she'd once feared, her own daughter.

However good and lovable he might be, Tommy needed an older woman: marriage with so young and inexperienced a girl as Viola could only end in disaster; nor, Mary felt sure, would Henry have permitted it. She remembered, then, Tommy's artless remarks regarding her own marriage—thinking of Henry had brought them to mind—and she supposed that what he'd said was true. People probably did look upon them as an ideal couple; no doubt, everyone in Prior's Oak spoke of Dr. Delair's devotion to his wife, and cited him as being a husband with whom any woman would be happy; and this, Mary thought in anguish, had been true of them both.

A few weeks ago, she and Henry *were* an ideally happy couple, and no woman on earth could have had a more devoted husband; but to recall the past only made things worse and added to her grief. She must think of the future now, and find some way of hiding the truth which, in a little place like Prior's Oak, could so easily become known to others, if she were not both careful and discreet. It only needed a whisper, that there was trouble between Dr. and Mrs. Delair, to set people gossiping, and the scandal would very soon spread around the entire village: and that, Mary decided, must be prevented at all costs; not so much for her own and Henry's sake, but the children's, who, though they might never mention it, would feel the disgrace keenly, and suffer through no fault of their own.

2

Any doubts Mary may have felt as to whether she had come to a right decision, were set at rest the moment her daughter entered the house. Viola arrived in Mr. Fawdry's taxi, just as Hetty had taken tea into the drawing-room, and was obviously glad to be back; in fact, she admitted as much, and showed quite clearly that she was happier at home than anywhere else; simply, Mary knew, because the parents she trusted and loved formed as it were a background, giving her a feeling of security; and it was this same happiness and security which Mary intended the children to keep, if it were humanly possible, and regardless of the suffering she might bring on herself.

Within five minutes of her arrival, everyone in the house knew that Viola had returned. She tore upstairs

to see her grandmother, then down again, out to the kitchen to give Cookie a hug; after which she settled down and ate an enormous tea, but not until she'd fetched a small hamper from the hall, and, opening it, displayed two minute kittens to her mother's astonished gaze.

She said: "Aren't they sweet? I had to bring them. You don't mind, do you, Mummy? They're both little gentlemen—real gentlemen, I mean, being very well bred. It's been so awful not to have a puss-cat in the house. They'd like a drink, I think."

Whereupon Viola took two of Mary's beautiful Rockingham saucers and put them in front of the kittens full of milk, which they promptly lapped up; then, with their three-inch tails held aloft, went cautiously around the room on a voyage of discovery, finally jumping on to a chair into which they subsided and almost disappeared, since it was large, and only their tiny faces could be seen peeping out from its depth.

Mary said: "They're very good. What are you going to call them? Or have they already got names?"

"Yes. The black one is George, after Lord Chelm, and the tabby is Felix, because he's such a happy little cat. Look, Mummy! They've gone to sleep, the darlings. The journey must have tired them. It was pretty ghastly. We seemed to stop everywhere, and a woman in our carriage would persist in eating oranges. Oh!" said Viola, "I am glad to be back! It's really knowing all the time you'll be coming home, which makes visiting so enjoyable. Have you ever thought of that, Mummy?"

"No; it never occurred to me. I've always imagined that if people were enjoying themselves at a friend's

house, they would put off returning home for as long as they could. Anyway—you're back safely, now; and I'm glad to have you, darling. The house seemed very quiet and dull after you'd gone."

"Yes; I can see you've missed me. You look . . ."—Viola eyed her mother appraisingly—"not exactly haggard, but a bit pulled down, Mummy; so perhaps it's a good thing I came when I did. Actually," Viola said, casually, "it was Alice's idea that we should. She wanted to get back to Tommy—she's desperately in love with him, did you know?"

"Well," Mary hesitated, "I had my suspicions."

"And if it comes off—I mean, if they do get married"—Viola pursued her own thoughts—"they'll have me to thank for everything. I've done an awful lot of spade work, Mummy, besides acting as gooseberry, and turning myself into a chaperon."

Mary laughed. "But, my ridiculous child! Being an unmarried girl yourself, you can't chaperone anyone!"

"I know. Don't be so literal, Mummy. I really meant I went around with them to 'spooof' our gossiping neighbours. We always set off from the house as a trio; then I used to come home or go on to the village and leave Alice and Tommy by themselves."

"Did you indeed! That really was very naughty, Viola. I wish", Mary said, a little worriedly, "you hadn't interfered, darling. It's so much wiser to let people manage their own affairs."

"I agree; if they can. But Tommy needed a hand, badly. He was almost too shy to look at Alice, after he'd fallen in love with her; and I had to get the silly boy up here and talk to him for hours, before I could ram some sense into his head. And if you're worrying about Mrs. Taplow, there's no need. She's terribly fond of Tommy,

and won't mind their marrying, so long as he doesn't take Alice away from her. I imagine they'll knock down a dividing wall and turn the two houses into one, so that they can live all together and yet not be on top of each other. Then there's Joe—he'll stay, of course. I should think Mrs. Taplow would let Alice marry a Hottentot, if he could bring a cook like Joe along with him. Anyway—say a little prayer for them, Mummy, that things will work out all right. And now, I'd better go and unpack. Shall I leave George and Felix where they are, or take them out to Cookie?"

"No; they're quite safe and happy; and I shall be here for a little while."

"Good! I'd hate to disturb them. I'll just go and fling my things out and be down again in a second. Is Daddy coming home early this evening?"

"Yes; I think so. At least, he's promised to do his best. He seems . . ." Mary hesitated. "He's terribly busy at the moment, and rather tired and overstrained, I'm afraid."

"Is he? Poor lamb! Why do they go on making their silly bombs, then, and letting them off! No one is any the better for it, as far as I can see. What Daddy needs is a holiday. He ought to go for a cruise and take you with him."

"That's a good idea, darling. You might suggest it to Daddy. He can but refuse." Mary spoke lightly, intending to pass this off as a joke. But Viola, apparently, had meant it seriously, because, later when they were having dinner, she brought the subject up again, first scrutinizing her father's face so carefully, that Henry, who had kept his word and returned early, asked: "What's the matter, Viola? Why are you looking at me like that? It's most embarrassing."

"I'm sorry, Daddy. I was just trying to find out for myself if what Mummy said was true. And it is. You look dreadful, darling, and twice your age. Since I've been away," Viola said, portentously, "you've changed enormously."

Henry raised an eyebrow but he flushed. "Really! And in ten days; or was it a fortnight? Don't be ridiculous, Viola. What is all this leading up to, anyway?"

Viola said, calmly: "I'm coming to that. You must take a holiday, Daddy. I know I'm right; and Mummy agrees with me. We were talking about it this afternoon."

"Viola, darling . . . I didn't . . . I never said such a thing. . . ."

"Perhaps," Henry broke in, "you'll allow me to decide this for myself. I don't need a holiday, and I have no intention of taking one." He turned to Mary. "What on earth have you been saying, my dear, to put these silly ideas into the child's head?"

"Nothing, Henry. At least" Mary bit her lip—"only that you were very busy, and seemed rather overtired; and a little worried at times."

"Which is quite obvious, Daddy, to anyone with a grain of sense, so you needn't be cross: especially on my first evening at home. And that's another thing," Viola went on: "you used never to be cross; it shows you're het up and overworked, and I think you ought to do something about it—for Mummy's sake. You can see she's anxious. She looks terribly worried, herself, poor darling."

There was silence whilst Hetty changed their plates and brought in the sweet. Then Henry said: "In that case, perhaps it's your mother who needs a holiday; and all I can suggest is, you both go off somewhere together. What about London? There's the flat; and you could

have quite a good time. May is the right month to be in London—plenty going on, and the parks looking their best.”

“No,” said Mary. She added vehemently: “Anywhere else, but not London,” because her memories of the flat were such that she never wanted to go inside or think of it again. She could see Sylvia’s taunting face, now; and looking across the table at Henry, she met his eyes, and the expression in them puzzled her, since it held no shame, as one would expect, but rather entreaty, as though he were asking something of her. Understanding, perhaps; or maybe forgiveness, neither of which she could give him unless he disclosed his secret and told her the truth.

He said then, quite gently and in his normal tone of voice: “You must please yourself, dear. Nobody’s forcing you to go to London. There are plenty of other places to choose from.”

“I know; but I’m staying at home. I’d rather. And please”—Mary made a slight gesture—“may we change the conversation? It’s getting a little tiresome. Viola, darling, don’t forget you’ll have to make up a warm bed somewhere for George and Felix. Ask Cookie to give you one of her apple baskets, and I’ll find an old cushion and a jersey or two.”

“Where are they going to sleep?” Henry wanted to know.

“Not in the drawing-room, I hope.”

“No; they’d be terribly lonely and probably cry all night. I shall have them up with me,” said Viola, “and if” she added, defiantly, “they get on my bed, there they’ll stay. I shan’t mind a bit; in fact, I rather hope they do.”

“Well,” Henry said, mildly, “that’s up to you. Per-

sonally, I strongly object to having animals on my bed, but I shouldn't dream of interfering with your pleasure, my dear. On the contrary, I'd like to add to it, so tell me—where shall we go this evening? What's on at the pictures? Anything worth seeing?"

"No," said Viola. "It's one of those ghastly horror films—you know—an X certificate and nobody under sixteen allowed inside the cinema sort of thing. The posters are enough to give you a nightmare. Alice and I saw them as we passed on our way from the station. It's awfully sweet of you, though, to think of taking us, Daddy; but I've always said you were the nicest man in the world."

Henry shook his head. "I'm afraid, darling, you're speaking out of a vast and youthful inexperience. You've met so few men; and how many, up to now, have you known intimately? However"—he pushed his table napkin to one side and stood up—"as the pictures are out, isn't there anything else we can do? What do you suggest, Mary? How about a run in the car? We could go over Mendip as far as Cheddar, and back through Burrington. Wouldn't you like that?"

"No; I don't feel up to it, Henry. Besides, there won't be time. We should have started two hours ago." Pain stabbed her anew. How could he, she wondered, speak to her so easily, and as though everything were as it used to be? As though all his interest and affection lay with his family, and Sylvia didn't exist? Yet it was possible, Mary knew, for a husband or a wife to have a secret love affair, and, at the same time care for their family, simply by keeping the two safely apart; and, no doubt, she thought, bitterly, deriving a certain amount of pleasure from both; but, if this was what Henry intended to do, she couldn't . . . she wouldn't put up with

it, or allow herself, as his wife, to be placed in such an undignified and humiliating position as that.

She heard Viola say, as from a distance: "Look at Mummy! She's miles off the earth. What are you thinking about, darling? We're still here; come back to us," and realized again, as she had before, that she would have to bear it, and put up with all the humiliation and hurt—she could do nothing else—except, and this was impossible, make a clean break and leave Henry, the very thought of which broke her heart.

Smiling a little uncertainly and walking to the door, Mary said: "I was rather in the clouds I'm afraid. As for your evening's entertainment, dear, I don't really know what you can do. I have to write some letters; and you mustn't forget your 'Collins' to Lady Chelm. I think it should go off tomorrow by the early post. A small village like Chelm would probably have only one delivery a day,"

"Yes; all right, Mummy. I'll write tonight, then it will be off my mind. And I can truthfully say that I enjoyed myself. They were both frightfully kind, and said they'd like me to come again later on, when the hunting starts."

"You know," Henry said, prowling about the room and looking under cushions and opening drawers in search of his pipe and tobacco pouch, "it's a mystery to me how the Chelms manage to live as they do. We hear of their having to sell land, and . . . Mary, where on earth is my pipe? I was smoking the darned thing just before dinner. You must have taken it; I do wish women wouldn't hide things away . . . it's their mania for tidiness. What harm, I ask you, is there in a pipe lying for a few minutes on a . . . oh! sorry." Henry, suddenly discovering the pipe in his pocket, looked

slightly foolish and distinctly guilty all at once. "Well . . . what was I saying?"

"Something about Lord Chelm selling land," Mary reminded him, speaking from behind the evening paper.

"Hm yes; we're always being told they're pawning the family jewels and on the verge of bankruptcy, yet they keep horses and hunt and run a car, besides managing to spend a Season in town. You must admit it's very odd."

"Very," Mary agreed.

But Viola, who, having lived for nearly two weeks with the Chelms, considered herself an authority on their financial position, put her father right. She said: "Lord Chelm doesn't keep horses, Daddy; he's got one - an old flea-bitten grey. And their car is literally tied up with string. I believe they bought it in 1939, and second-hand at that. Of course, Chelm is dreadfully expensive to keep up; Alice told me the taxes were enormous, and that Cousin George had to sell timber and land to pay the wretched things."

Henry, in the middle of packing his pipe, waved it as a flag of truce, and conceded that Lord Chelm was a brave man and deserved everyone's sympathy, whereupon Viola said: "I should think so, poor darling! And he's such a pet. May I borrow your pen, Daddy. I've lost mine. Actually, I think Rick took it by mistake."

But neither Mary nor Viola got any letters written that night, because Dr. and Mrs. Fabian arrived soon after eight to make what they called a friendly call. While Henry, who was just settling down comfortably to enjoy a pipe and Kendall's *Richard the Third*, which he'd bought on the day of publication and been longing

to read ever since, had, perforce, to lay both aside and become all at once a courteous host, though inwardly he was seething at having his peaceful evening disturbed, and wishing that Dr. and Mrs. Fabian had chosen some other time to visit them.

Chapter Nine

MARY, however, reacted quite differently. She was, in fact, thankful to see the doctor and his wife, and grateful to them for coming, knowing as she did what a strain it would have been to spend the entire evening with Henry alone, and that the presence of strangers could ease a situation, and help one through a difficult time. So Mrs. Fabian was assured of her welcome and put into a comfortable little fireside chair, and Dr. Fabian given a slightly larger one, which appeared to suit them both. Henry, too, had recovered himself and was beginning to feel quite amiable, because he really liked the doctor very much; he also had an idea that some company might cheer Mary up—Viola was right; she did look rather harassed and strained—and, no doubt, an evening's gossip and talk with the Fabians would do her a lot of good.

Hetty, having taken coffee and various alcoholic drinks to the drawing-room, went back to Cookie and reported that they were all talking nineteen to the dozen, and you couldn't hear yourself think, which was true enough, though not of Mary, since she seemed content to listen, taking care, however, whilst carrying out her hostess's duties, to show an interest in the conversation by a smile and quiet word or two.

It was Mrs. Fabian who turned to her suddenly and aid: "I suppose, as you were in London a day or two

ago, you haven't heard the latest news, Mrs. Delair?" adding, because the doctor lifted a warning eyebrow: "It's all right, Roger; I'm not talking scandal—merely repeating what everyone knows—and surely there's no harm in that?"

Henry, getting up to take Mrs. Fabian's coffee cup, asked: "D'you mean, this particular piece of news has already been spread around the village?"

"Yes; and in Oakbridge, I imagine. It isn't the kind of thing you could hide very well; and personally I'm not at all surprised. I always thought the Olivet marriage would break up eventually."

Mary said: "Oh no!" She sounded distressed. "But what happened? Has Jim Olivet left his wife?"

"On the contrary," said Dr. Fabian, "Mrs. Olivet was the one to take the initiative and run away from Jim. She packed her belongings then rang up for a taxi, and was out of the house before Jim got back from his office. And small blame to her! I admire the girl. If I were a woman, and had a husband like Olivet, I'd do the same."

"Yes, that's all very well, but . . ." Henry hesitated, then went on: "How do we know it's a final break? Mightn't she, perhaps, have gone off in a fit of pique, intending to give Jim a fright, and return after a month or so? How on earth", Henry repeated, "can anyone know that they've parted for good?"

"Well, she left a note saying she would never live with him again, and that he could expect to hear from her solicitors in due course, so it looks as though there'll be a divorce. Actually," Mrs. Fabian said, a little awkwardly, "Roger and I know all this, because Jim came over to our house straight away and told us everything. I must say, he seemed absolutely distraught; and the

next day—that would be yesterday—he came to wish us good-bye, and said he was putting the house in an agent's hands and leaving Prior's Oak immediately."

"I wonder where he will go," said Viola. It was the first remark she had made, and reminded Mary of her recent friendship with Jim Olivet, so that a new fear presented itself—a fear lest their names should be linked together—and that people would point Viola out as being *one* of the reasons for his broken marriage, and lay a certain amount of blame to her charge. Their friendship, of course, had been entirely innocent; but, unfortunately, the most innocent behaviour could be made to appear and even sound quite different to what it was, especially in cases where a wife is accusing her husband of infidelity: and, already overburdened with worry and grief, poor Mary had visions of Viola in the witness-box, being cross-examined by a clever and slightly cynical Q.C. who would probably get the child so tied up and muddled that she wouldn't know what she was saying half the time.

Telling herself not to be such a fool, and that it couldn't possibly happen, Mary got up and drew the curtains, then came back to her chair by Dr. Fabian, who was engaged in a wordy but perfectly friendly argument with Henry, as to whether Mrs. Olivet should or should not have left Jim. He said: "Do you honestly think, then, that a husband can treat his wife exactly as he likes and get away with it? I mean . . ."

"I know what you mean—don't bother to explain. All I'm saying is that Olivet's wife behaved very foolishly. A wise woman in her position would have stopped to think, and reflected on the action she was about to take; or at least warned her husband of what she intended to do, and given him a chance to put things

right. I wonder," said Henry, "how many marriages have been saved, simply by the wife's discretion and common sense."

"Or do you mean her complaisancy?" Mary put in quietly; and Dr. Fabian added: "He probably does, Mrs. Delair. And I'll willingly admit that a woman who is prepared to wink or shut her eye to whatever goes on, can be sure of keeping things running smoothly and her family intact. But it's not my idea of how a woman should behave, for all that."

"Nor mine; and you're quite wrong in thinking I meant complaisancy. I never mentioned the word." Henry spoke a little impatiently. "I said—discretion and common sense, which are two vastly different things."

"And you maintain that if a woman has both she can reclaim an erring husband? But surely," Mrs. Fabian pointed out, reasonably, "a certain amount of co-operation must come from him. A wife may be as wise as Solomon, but she can't, after all, work miracles."

Dr. Fabian laughed. "Evidently, Joan thinks that men can only be kept faithful to one woman, by somebody performing a miracle! Which sweeping statement, my dear, I deeply resent, and feel bound to refute on behalf of my sex."

Mrs. Fabian said: "Don't be silly, darling," and gave her husband an affectionate glance; but amidst the general laughter, Henry alone remained grave, and looked as though he considered jokes about marital infidelity to be in the worst possible taste.

Or was it, Mary wondered, that he found the subject a little embarrassing and felt he had already said too much, and would have been wiser to keep his opinions to himself? It might well be, since men in Henry's posi-

tion must live in constant fear of betraying themselves; and to discuss somebody else's broken marriage, would bring their own guilt to mind, and, if they had any conscience at all, make them feel somewhat uncomfortable. And yet Mary was puzzled—even confused—by Henry's behaviour this evening, knowing as she did of his association with Sylvia, and his love for her. He should by rights have looked guilty, and been ashamed to meet either the doctor's or Mrs. Fabian's eyes; instead of which, he'd faced them both unflinchingly: nor, when the Olivet's marriage was discussed, had he sheered away from the subject, but joined in the conversation and given his opinion in no uncertain voice.

It was, Mary felt, very strange, and she wondered, with an almost fearful joy in her heart, whether Henry had fought and overcome his temptation, and vowed never to see Sylvia again. If this were so, she must do everything she could to help him, and prove that her love was as great as it had ever been; even greater, perhaps, because she would know he had chosen good rather than evil, and no man on earth could do more.

Meanwhile, the conversation had drifted to other topics: Henry and Dr. Fabian were now discussing the political situation, a subject which sunk them in such gloom, since there was, it seemed, a grim time coming for everyone, that Mrs. Fabian begged them to stop, and started to talk about village affairs. They were, she said, of far more interest than how the world was being run; Mike Clonnel, for instance, was home again, looking none the worse for his experience; and Mrs. Clonnel, of all things, had come up on a football pool.

"I think she won about a hundred and twenty-five pounds, which should be very useful. I wish to goodness I could. I've filled in my coupons for something like

five years and never got sixpence. It's most disheartening."

"You mean it's damned silly," said Dr. Fabian, "and an appalling waste of money. You'd do far better to save your two shillings or whatever it is each week, and give up football pools."

"Well, I don't know," said Viola. "Think of winning seventy-five thousand pounds!"

"I do; I even dream of it," Mrs. Fabian said, fervently. "The first thing I should buy would be a new carpet for the sitting-room; and I've planned to give Roger a really expensive car—one of those drawing-room-on-wheels sort of things."

"That's very good of you, my dear; and I appreciate your kind thought. But I'm afraid I shall have to wait a long time for the car to materialize; meanwhile, I'll just have to make do with the one I've got—which reminds me——" Dr. Fabian looked at his watch. "I think it's about time we went home. These good people will be tiring of our company and wanting to get to bed."

Mary laughed. "What, at ten o'clock! Don't, please, hurry on our account. It's been awfully nice seeing you both." And Henry added, hospitably: "Stay on a bit longer and have another drink. It's early yet."

Dr. Fabian, however, said no; they really must be getting along as he had a pretty strenuous day in front of him tomorrow. So Mary kissed Mrs. Fabian good night, and Henry, when he came back to the drawing-room after seeing them off, thought she looked better, and seemed much brighter in herself, which was all to the good, though he had never been able to understand why women should react in this way to company.

Sinking into a deep armchair, and reaching for the

local paper, he said: "Well, we've spent a very pleasant evening, but I can't help feeling Viola's horror film would have afforded us a little more excitement. I see here"—he tapped the sheet spread out on his knees—"that besides being stupendous, outstanding and unbelievable, it's guaranteed to chill your spine and raise what hair you possess. I'm afraid, Mary, we've missed a treat."

"Not really, Daddy. For one thing," Viola pointed out, "that's all a lot of hooey. Those kind of films aren't a bit exciting—they're just horrible—and scare me to death. It's all very well for you and Mummy; you don't have to sleep alone; and if Mummy wakes up terrified in the night, she's got you to hang on to, and comfort her."

Mary, who was emptying ash-trays and plumping up the cushions, said: "What are you talking about, Viola? I'm sorry, darling, I wasn't listening. And isn't it time you went to bed?"

"No; but I'm going all the same; because I have to settle George and Felix for the night, and it'll be eleven before I'm in. I wonder if I ought to let Granny see them, or d'you think she'll be asleep."

"Leave it until the morning," said Henry. "You're not to disturb Mother as late as this." He got up to knock out his pipe, then blew through it and sat down again; and Viola kissed her father and mother good night and went out of the room, humming a little tune under her breath.

There was silence after she had gone—quite a long silence, since Henry, apparently, could find nothing to say, and Mary feared to speak or put the questions she longed to ask into words. If only she knew what was in Henry's mind—if only he would be honest and tell her

the truth, they could, perhaps, talk things out as reasonable beings, or at least break down this terrible barrier which had arisen between them, and was causing her so much worry and grief. A little while ago, Mary felt almost certain that Henry had cut Sylvia out of his life; but now she hardly knew what to think or believe.

2

Unable to bear the prolonged and unnatural silence, she said at last: "I was surprised to hear about the Olivets, weren't you, Henry?"

"No; not really." Henry folded his paper and laid it aside. "I imagined something of the sort would happen. The wonder is they didn't part months ago."

"Perhaps," Mary said, carefully, "Mrs. Olivet hoped that if she waited long enough things might get better, and felt she ought to give her husband another chance. She probably thinks as you do, that it's a wife's duty to try and save her marriage from breaking up."

"If you remember rightly, what I said was, Mrs. Olivet should have stayed with Jim; and it's quite obvious that by calmly walking out on him she hadn't the slightest wish or desire to save their marriage. I suppose," Henry went on, after a little pause, "the Olivets might have patched things up if they'd had a family. Children do rather complicate matters where there's a question of divorce; and I think they often keep a husband and wife together, who otherwise would part."

"Oh, divorce!" Mary flushed. "Well, I don't know much about it—I have no need to, thank God. That's one thing we can be certain will never happen to any

member of our family." She waited a moment; then asked deliberately:

"It is quite impossible, isn't it, Henry? Or am I, perhaps, taking too much for granted, and forgetting the human element?"

The words were out now for good or ill, and, although she knew they must have some effect on Henry, his reaction to them took her completely by surprise. He said, and his voice had an edge to it: "What on earth possesses you to ask me that? If you're so sure divorce for a Delair is impossible, why bring the subject up at all? You must have a reason, and I insist upon knowing what it is."

"Henry!" Mary whispered his name and realized she was trembling. "Don't look at me like that; I can't bear it. And why are you so angry? I only asked a simple question. . . ."

"It wasn't simple, Mary; that's just the point. There was something—some inflexion in your voice—and I know . . . I'm certain that you meant more than you said."

"All right—I did. I don't mind admitting it." Mary turned to face him, her anger now matching his. "But you still haven't answered me. Is it true, that not one member of our family can ever get a divorce?"

"Yes," said Henry, "perfectly true. You know that as well as I do."

"And is it equally true that no Delair has ever had it suggested to them by somebody else?"

For a moment Henry remained silent, and Mary held her breath. Then, speaking evasively, he said: "You're rather labouring the question. I can't answer for every member of my family, but you may rest assured that I'm as unlikely to seek my freedom as ever to give you yours."

"I see; and you think that sums up everything, and should afford me all the comfort and satisfaction I need?"

"Well, yes; what more can I say? Actually, it's ridiculous to go on discussing the subject; and I don't know now why we started this argument. Anyway—I'm sorry I spoke as I did and apologize. The truth of it is," Henry added, in a calmer and more reasonable tone of voice, "you're a bit on edge, Mary. . . . I've noticed it ever since you came back from London . . . and, quite frankly, I'm worried."

"Worried! About me?" Mary started to laugh, realizing, too late, there was a note of hysteria in her laughter. "That really is funny, Henry!"

"It isn't funny at all. I'm merely being sensible. I think you need a change, so why not do as I suggested, and go away somewhere with Viola?"

Mary looked at him, her grey eyes wide and dark. She said, slowly: "Are you by any chance trying to get rid of me, Henry? I mean—do you want to be left here alone?"

"Mary! for God's sake what is all this about! You must be out of your mind! Can't a man send his wife away on a holiday, without being accused of wanting to get rid of her? Honestly . . ." Words failing him, Henry got up and walked to the window and back again. Then, coming over to Mary, he said: "Look, my dear; this proves I'm right. You're tired and overwrought; go to bed, now; we'll discuss the holiday tomorrow. But I'm warning you; I shall talk to Mother and get her in on my side, and once she's on the war-path, you won't be given the chance to say no. You'll just pack up and go."

He kissed her lightly on the cheek; and Mary, feeling

utterly spent, went upstairs to their room, wondering what good she had done, and why, having brought herself almost to the point of telling Henry the truth, she should suddenly have taken fright, and decided to leave things as they were.

It was the next morning, upon first awakening, that Mary realized she had behaved very foolishly last night, and virtually thrown away what, seen in retrospect, now appeared as a heaven-sent opportunity for getting this unhappy affair straightened out, and, perhaps, regaining her happiness. Like most men, Henry detested scenes and had scant patience with women who created them; and knowing this, she should have had the sense and discretion to keep quiet, instead of asking stupid questions about divorces in his family, and accusing him of wanting to get rid of her, both of which must have irritated Henry beyond measure, besides making her appear foolish and hysterical. Of what use then to bring the subject up again? Anything she said would not only anger Henry but, most probably, be set aside as merely the fancies of a temperamental woman, and might even drive him further and further away from her. Once more, Mary told herself she could do nothing but wait patiently; and pray, of course—prayer was really the strongest weapon she had—and the one which Father Cleeve or any other priest would tell her to use.

The thought brought its own comfort, and going into the breakfast-room, she was able to answer Viola's solicitous: "How are you feeling Mummy?" with a tranquil: "Quite well, darling," and even wished Henry good-bye in her normal tone of voice, though she didn't go out to see him off, but remained seated at the table; a procedure which Viola was quick to note and remark

upon. She said: "It's the first time I've known you to do that, Mummy."

"What, Viola?"

"Let Daddy go off by himself. You've always kissed him good-bye at the front door. I remember seeing you when I was quite a little girl. What's the poor darling done to be treated so scurvily?"

Mary tried to laugh this off. "Daddy won't be hurt for once; actually, he was in too much of a hurry to notice anything. Besides, my breakfast would have got cold."

Viola, glancing at her mother's plate, said: "Oh!" and added: "Do you really prefer your grape-fruit hot, darling? Of course, there's no accounting for taste, but it sounds disgusting to me." She broke off: "Here's the post!" and ran out of the room, returning after a few minutes with a pile of letters in her hand. "There's a card for you, Mummy—all the rest are Daddy's. It's from Aunt Primrose. She's arriving this afternoon, to stay a night or two, and hopes we shan't mind, or find it inconvenient to put her up. What's the use of asking us that! We can't possibly stop her from coming, now—unless we flag the train. Honestly, Aunt Primrose is the dumbest creature I've ever met!"

"Never mind. She knows we are always pleased to have her." Mary read the card and laid it aside. "I see, she's bringing Billy as well."

Viola said: "Look, Mummy, I'm here to help. Daddy told me you weren't to get overtired, and that I was to keep an eye on you."

"Oh, did he! That was very kind and thoughtful of him. Perhaps, then, you'll see to the flowers in Aunt Primrose's room, and fetch some things from the village. That really would be a tremendous help, dear." Mary

was gathering up Henry's letters as she spoke; and taking them into his study, she then went out to tell Cookie there would be two extra people to feed, feeling thankful, as she had last night, that they were to have company, and she and Henry, therefore, wouldn't be *à deux*.

But soon after lunch a telegram arrived, bearing the message: "Terribly sorry—plans changed. Letter follows. Love Primrose," which Viola said didn't surprise her in the least. It also caused a little dissatisfaction in the kitchen, as Cookie, apparently, had left the routine work undone to make one of her delicious fruit flans, and bake some special little iced cakes with a view to Billy's taste.

"All this chopping and changing," she grumbled to Hetty, "puts a body out. Why can't people make up their mind and stick to it! And now, I suppose, you'll have to strip the beds and put all the linen away. Be sure and fold the sheets carefully, and don't crease the pillow slips. I declare, it's just what Mrs. Colin would do. She's a feckless little creature—pretty, though, and as good as gold—with a lovely complexion and beautiful fair hair."

"That's her, in the drawing-room, isn't it?" said Hetty. "Standing on the mistress's desk with a little boy?"

"What d'you mean, Hetty?" Cookie sounded cross. "How on earth can Mrs. Colin be standing on a desk when she's in Kent?"

"I mean a photograph, Mrs. Traile. It's a big one in a silver frame."

"Oh, that! I see now what you're getting at. Yes—it's good of her and the boy."

"There's a photo of Mr. Delair by himself. He's a

good-looker if you like! Ever so handsome. He might be a film star."

"And one day, you might have a bit of sense. Film star indeed! You girls don't never think of nothing else! Who's the man with no hair on his head, hanging over your bed?"

"I haven't got any man hanging over my bed, Mrs. Traile. It fair gives me the creeps to think of such a thing—sounds like a murder. I've got a photo, though, of Yul Brunner, up on my wall, if that's what you mean."

"Oh! So his name's Yul Brunner, is it? Well, I took a good look at him one day, when I went into your room, and I'll admit he's got a nice face and kind eyes. You can always tell people's character by their eyes; not but what one of my uncles had such a squint, you couldn't hardly say who he was supposed to be looking at; and a kinder and better man never lived on the earth. Anyway—talking won't get the work done, so you'd best be putting the kettle on, and start cutting the bread and butter. There's only the mistress; Miss Viola is out to tea."

Hetty, because she was a willing and good-tempered girl, said: "Right you are, Mrs. Traile"; and Cookie, having had her grumble, went into the pantry and eyed the fruit flan with satisfaction, knowing her master would appreciate it if nobody else, and remembering how, when she was only a kitchenmaid and he a little boy, she'd always made one for his birthday, and claimed a kiss in return by way of a reward, which, bless his heart, he'd given most willingly.

Chapter Ten

VIOLA had to do the waiting on Hetty's night off, so at dinner this evening, bringing in the sweets, she put the fruit flan in front of her father, saying: "That's for you, darling, with Cookie's love."

Henry said: "Why this treat? My white pig hasn't made me a flan for months. She must be feeling in a very good mood."

"She isn't—or rather, she wasn't, earlier this afternoon," said Mary. "And you wouldn't have got your flan at all if Primrose hadn't written to say she wanted to come for a night or two. We expected her by the afternoon train; so Cookie naturally started to bake and brew."

"Primrose! You mean, she invited herself? But I don't understand. Why wasn't I told? And what's happened? Why isn't she here?"

"Plans changed," Viola said, crisply. "Telegram arrives at two-thirty, just as we're all running round in circles. Not coming. Terribly sorry. But she sent her love—think of it, Daddy, on a telegram—to console us in our loss, I suppose."

"I wish you wouldn't interrupt, Viola. I'm talking to your mother." Henry looked and sounded thoroughly put out. He turned to Mary. "Did Primrose say why she was coming, or give you any idea what her reasons were?"

"No; and she only sent a card. I should imagine that she was on her way back from somewhere, and then decided to go straight home after all."

"Nonsense! Primrose never goes anywhere. She must have wanted to see us urgently and had a definite object in mind. And something or someone prevented her from starting off."

Henry brooded for a moment, unmindful of the food—even his flan—in front of him, until Mary said: "Aren't you going to have any of that, Henry? Poor Cookie will be so terribly hurt if you don't," when he cut himself a slice and started to eat it, but with no enjoyment or interest; and Mary went on: "I shouldn't worry; in any case, Primrose is writing to explain. She said a letter would follow, so tomorrow we shall know what it's all about."

Henry thought this over for a moment. Then he said: "If the letter is addressed to me, I'd like you to ring up, and I'll send somebody to fetch it. Will you do that, Mary?"

"Yes, of course; though I think it's far more likely that Primrose will write to me."

"Well, if she does, don't bother to ring up. But I shall still be interested to hear what explanation she gives, so perhaps you'll allow me to see her letter when it comes."

Mary promised faithfully that she would, at the same time wondering why Henry, who always maintained that it was as boring to read other people's letters as last week's news, should want to concern himself with the matter at all, and plough through what would probably be an effusion most typical of his sister-in-law.

She kept her word, however, and after glancing through Primrose's letter which fortunately arrived the

following morning by the first post, passed it over to Henry, saying casually: "There's nothing in it, I'm afraid, that could be of the slightest interest to you. Primrose merely says she changed her mind at the last minute, and decided it would be silly to come all this way and spend so much money, just to talk something over with us. And that something, as far as I can make out, was Colin's job and position in life. Only you know what Primrose's letters are—she really has surpassed herself in this one—it's nothing but underlinings and exclamation marks."

Henry, who was already fully engrossed and putting the pages neatly one behind the other as he finished reading them, merely grunted; then, having come to the end, he folded the letter and handed it back to Mary, who said: "Well, what do you think? Can you make head or tail of it?"

"Oh yes; it's quite simple, really. Primrose is evidently worried about Colin having to work so hard, and thinks I should find him a better job. If you read her letter again"—Henry pointed to it lying by Mary's place—"you'll see she says Colin has frequently to stay late at the office, and complains that he is so often away from home. At least—he was up to a few weeks ago——" Henry hesitated; then went on: "The poor girl, apparently, is feeling the strain, and hopes I'll do something to help her out of the difficulty. That's why she suddenly decided to come and see us, yesterday, only being Primrose, she naturally got scared and called the whole thing off. Now, it seems, I'm expected to straighten matters out and fix Colin up in a new job, both of which, according to my little sister-in-law, can be done with ease."

"Well, I don't know," said Mary. She was re-reading

Primrose's letter. "Quite honestly, I think your little sister-in-law is taking rather too much for granted. I mean, why should you be worried with Colin's affairs? He's an adult, after all—not a child—and ought to be able to look after himself."

Henry made a gesture denoting helplessness. "Colin, my dear, has never been able to look after himself. As for your other remark—am I or am I not my brother's keeper? I ask myself that, and what answer do I get? Which means," he added, after a moment's deliberation, "I shall have to meet Colin in London one day, and talk things out with him."

Mary was silent, puzzled by the sudden change in Henry's manner, and wondering what could have brought that look of relief to his face, as though some dreadful worry had been taken off his mind: or was it that he intended to meet Sylvia and not Colin in London, and the very thought of seeing her again filled him with a light-hearted happiness?

Thinking it must be that, and her suspicions aroused, Mary asked coldly: "Why London? Can't you go to Millsham and see Colin in his own home? I should have thought—what I mean is, oughtn't you to let Primrose in on this conference?"

"No," Henry said, decidedly, "certainly not. And why shouldn't I go to London? Are you afraid I'll get run over, or coshed on the head and robbed?"

"Neither. I wasn't," said Mary, still more coldly, "thinking of anything like that. You'll stay at the flat, I suppose?"

"Yes, of course. Why? Were you planning to come with me?"

"I don't know." Mary shrugged her shoulders. "I might." She asked, in her turn: "Why? Would

you rather I didn't? Is that what you're trying to say?"

"I'm not trying to say anything, Mary. But, to be perfectly frank, I would rather you stayed at home, just this once."

"In other words, you want to go alone. Well, I can understand that Wives, I'm sure, must hamper their husbands terribly at times."

Henry laughed, taking the words as a joke. "You never hamper us, my dear; only there are occasions when you're a little out of place, perhaps."

"Yes; I've no doubt. And don't worry, Henry. I haven't any intention of coming, so you'll be absolutely free."

"It's not exactly a case of my being free," Henry said, awkwardly. "But I have one or two people to see, and I honestly think you'll be happier here at home, with your garden and . . . and everything."

The last was spoken a little lamely; then, picking up his own letters, Henry went out to the waiting car, and today Mary followed to wish him good-bye as usual, knowing that if she omitted to do so, Viola, who was in the garden with George and Felix, would be certain to notice her father, for the second time, had been allowed to leave the house unattended, and this Mary wished to avoid.

She had, in fact, to act a part and be constantly on her guard; so, for the next few days Mary made a supreme effort to appear bright and cheerful, as though she hadn't a care in the world; and, like other women in her position, bore up bravely, and never by so much as a word betrayed what she was suffering and going through. But the strain told on her; for how long, she wondered, could her grief be kept from others? And

happening to meet Father Cleever outside the church, on the very day Henry went off to London, she felt a sudden desire to tell him her troubles and ask his advice.

She had only to say: "May I speak to you a moment, Father?" for him to reply: "Yes, certainly, Mrs. Delair," and lead the way, either into the sacristy or the little parlour of his presbytery. She could then unburden herself of all the worry and grief, knowing that whatever guidance Father Cleever gave her, would, as a priest's and the custodian of truths which had been handed down through the ages, be as impartial as it was clear.

But just at that moment his housekeeper came hurrying out of the church, and said: "Oh, Father, I'm glad I've caught you! They've rung through to say Mr. Colwood's taken a turn for the worse. Doctor thinks he's dying, so will you, please, go at once."

Father Cleever with a murmured: "You'll excuse me, Mrs. Delair. I shall have to hurry," turned back, and Mary went on her way, deciding that Providence must have stepped in and prevented her from speaking to Father Cleever for some good reason, at the same time regretting the loss of his help and advice.

The efforts she had made, however, to behave normally and hide the truth, brought their reward, inasmuch that Henry was still regarded by his family and friends as an ideal husband, father and son. People, she knew, envied her, and said how lucky she was to have married a man like Dr. Delair: hardly a day passed but what Henry's mother spoke of her son's goodness and kindness, all of which brought comfort to Mary's sad heart, though it was her children she thought of most and wished to safeguard, knowing what irreparable harm suffering could do to the young, and that they needed and should be given security.

But if the young were vulnerable to hurt, they were, Mary discovered and had to admit, also very sensible, and capable of handling a difficult situation quite as well, or even better, perhaps, than an older person like herself, and she realized this the following afternoon, when strolling around the garden with Viola's arm tucked in hers, the conversation drifted to what the village now referred to as "the Olivet affair". It was her daughter's forthright:

"Jim was rather an ass, you know," which made Mary ask: "In what way?" and add: "I'm surprised to hear you say that. I always thought he was a great friend of yours."

"Not a great friend, Mummy. We used to go about together—at one time, quite a lot. . . ."

"Yes," Mary interrupted, "and it worried me terribly, Viola."

"I know, darling. I can see your poor dear face, now, looking as though you expected to hear I'd eloped any minute of the day! But there wasn't the slightest need for you to get so worked up. One thing I can do," Viola said calmly, "and that is, handle men. It didn't take me long to see what Jim had in mind, and I very soon showed him where he got off."

"Viola, dear! Your expressions! And what was it exactly that Jim Olivet had in mind?"

"Oh, Mummy! Can't you guess? He wanted me to have an *affaire* with him, of course; so I naturally told the wretched creature what I thought of him, and said he was never to see me again or put his silly face inside our gates!"

Mary said weakly: "Well, you were at least honest. And how did he react to that?"

"Oh, just laughed—or tried to—but really he was

hopping mad, because no woman, apparently, has ever turned him down, and it was an awful blow to his pride. And if you're worrying about my having helped to break the marriage up, you can stop right now. Mrs. Olivet knew she could trust me . . . in fact, she said so; and I used to sit and listen to all her troubles. The poor thing had to confide in someone, or she would have gone completely bats. And I can tell you the name of the girl who'll be cited as co-respondent, if she sues Jim for a divorce."

"Well, don't, darling. I'd rather not know. And I hate your talking about divorce and co-respondents, so do, please, stop."

"But why, Mummy? It happens over and over again, though not to people like us, of course. Oh, and that was another thing I said to Jim. I told him what a wonderful person Daddy was, and how horrified and disgusted he'd be at the idea of a married man running after other women. That did rather hit him on the raw, I know; because he thought an awful lot of you both. Actually," Viola went on, "Jim didn't believe in the sanctity of marriage; but I remember he once said that father's and mother's made him think there might be something in it after all. He sounded a bit envious; so you see, darling, what an example you and Daddy are to the rest of mankind!"

To this, Mary could only express a hope that if Mr. Olivet really envied people who were happily married, he would make things up with his wife, and, in future, try to behave himself, feeling meanwhile a deep and sincere thankfulness that, to Viola, Henry was still the most wonderful father in the world, and could still be sure of having her parents pointed out as an ideally happy couple; which faith and trust, Mary vowed,

should never be destroyed or taken away from the child, however much suffering it brought to herself.

She was also greatly relieved that her worries concerning Viola and Jim Olivet were at an end; and it was then Mary realized how sensibly and adequately her daughter had dealt with the man, and marvelled that anyone so young as Viola could handle the situation without appealing to her parents for help. Viola was, of course, essentially modern and a girl of her generation; but Mary still thought she had shown decided character and unusual common sense, and proved she was well able to take care of herself.

2

Later in the day, Mary confided the story to her mother-in-law, who, as she had expected, at once said: "Well, what did I tell you? I always knew Viola was too good and much too sensible to get involved with a married man. But as it's entirely due to your training and Henry's that she behaved as she did, you should, I think, take a little credit to yourselves."

There was silence for a moment, then Mrs. Delair asked: "When is Henry coming back, Mary? And why has he gone to London? Do you know?"

"I think . . ." Mary hesitated. "He said something about having to see Colin, but I'm not really sure."

"Oh yes! I remember, now; Henry told me he'd had a letter from Colin—let me see—it was the day before he went away. I didn't read the letter, but Colin probably wrote to say where they would meet."

Mary, remembering that Henry had spoken of going to London, several days before his brother's letter

arrived, said: "Most likely . . . yes, I expect you're right," and there was another silence, broken again by Mrs. Delair.

She said: "Has it struck you that Henry is decidedly odd, these days, Mary? I don't mean mentally queer, of course, but so dreadfully tetchy and on edge, and quite unlike himself. I wondered if it were my imagination, or whether you'd noticed what a difference there was in him. I've been meaning to ask you, because if he's ill or there's anything wrong, I should be told. I am his mother after all."

Mary assured her mother-in-law, in as calm a tone of voice as she could manage, that Henry was perfectly well; but to say nothing had gone wrong would mean telling a deliberate lie, and this, she felt, was as bad or even worse than disclosing the truth. So, wisely ignoring Mrs. Delair's tentative suggestion that Henry might have a private worry of his own, she added, hurriedly:

"Oh, by the way, Mother—before I forget—about Alice's wedding present. You know she's engaged to Tommy Fraser? The announcement was in yesterday's *Times*, and it seems they are to be married very soon . . . next month, I believe. Henry and I will probably send them a cheque; I imagine it would be more acceptable than anything else, but what do you think?" Thus changing the conversation to some purpose, because engagements and weddings were of the greatest interest to Mrs. Delair, and she was quite ready now to discuss Alice's, wanting particularly to know what colour the bridesmaids's dresses were to be, and whether Lord Chelm would give Alice away.

Mary, having no idea, was unable to give an answer to either of these questions, but promised to find out and let her mother-in-law know. Actually, she had

never felt so grateful to anyone as she did to Alice, for getting married at all; because, Henry arrived home that evening in time for dinner, and the subject of her engagement and wedding carried them through the meal.

Viola, of course, was to be chief bridesmaid, and Henry, hearing this, gave a resigned sigh and said: "More expense for me. It's all a most ghastly waste of money, but good for trade, I suppose."

To which Viola rejoined: "Mummy will give me this dress, darling. Your worries don't start until I'm married. I can see my wedding costing you the earth, so be prepared for a shock."

"Oh well; there's plenty of time yet. I never believe in running to meet trouble. Besides, how d'you know you'll ever get married? You might end up by being an old maid."

"There aren't any these days. They're all single women from choice." Viola giggled and started to chant: "Why don't the men propose, mamma, why don't the men propose?" until Henry said he couldn't enjoy his dinner with that sort of thing going on, and ordered her to stop.

He was certainly in a very cheerful mood, probably, Mary decided, because he'd seen Sylvia and spent several hours in her company, but the less she thought about that the better. The only way she could go on living at all, and bearing the pain, would be to make her mind a complete blank, and not even think or try and find out where Henry was or how he filled his time, once he'd left the house. By doing this she may, perhaps, keep the family together and her marriage from being wrecked; though, no doubt, there were people who would say she was extremely foolish, and advise her to act quite differently.

Having made her decision, and not lightly at that, Mary intended to carry it out, feeling certain she would be given strength and help. But when the very next day she was confronted with a tangible proof of Henry's guilt, the same terrible weakness again came over her, and for a moment life itself seemed to stop.

Unwarned and little knowing what she would find, Mary had gone into Henry's study, and opened a drawer of his desk in search of stamps. It was a thing she very seldom did; indeed, Henry usually made a point of keeping his desk locked, in view of the fact that he often had private documents to look over and peruse. But today he must either have been in too much of a hurry or forgotten, because the key was in the lock, and Mary naturally felt she had a right to make use of it. And the first thing she saw, lying face upwards, was a photograph of Sylvia. There could be no mistake: it was the same lovely little face which Mary had constantly seen in front of her eyes and tried in vain to banish; the same eyes and beautiful seductive mouth. Sylvia! the girl Henry loved; and, "Oh God!" Mary whispered, clenching her hands, "the woman I hate."

Slowly she turned the photograph over and read what was written on the back. "To my darling Gerrard. From his own loving Sylvia."

Then, sickened, she put it down, knowing that her past grief and suffering were as nothing, compared to the agony she was now going through. Because always, before, there had been a faint hope in her heart that things might not be quite as bad as she thought—Henry, perhaps, had merely been a little indiscreet—or that Sylvia was trying to get money out of him and threatening exposure, all of which would account for his anxious and worried look. So many doubts and fears

had been in her mind, but she would have gone on bearing them rather than be given this appalling certainty.

There were, she noticed, letters, too; a bundle of them held together with an elastic band, the top one out of its envelope. She saw the words: "Gerrard, my dearest," and turned her eyes away, not wishing to see or read any more. But after closing and locking the drawer, she was forced to sit down, feeling suddenly faint, and leaning over the desk with her arms outstretched, she let grief have its way and cried bitterly.

Presently, since the tears were a relief, she grew calmer, and when the telephone rang, was able to answer it, though her hand shook a little whilst lifting the receiver.

She said: "Oakbridge 264," in rather a husky voice, and waited until somebody at the other end said: "I'd like to speak to Mrs. Delair, if she's anywhere about." Then: "Hello! Is that you, Mary?"

"Gile! Oh, my dear!" Mary caught her breath. "How lovely to hear your voice!"

"Well, make the most of it, because I haven't the time to say very much. Actually, I'm on my way up from Cornwall; I've been giving a Retreat to the Poor Clares; and I thought it would be rather nice to break my journey and take a look at you all and stay a night or two. May I?"

"Oh, Giles! Yes, of course. When? When will you be coming, I mean?"

"This afternoon. I'm on Exeter station at the moment, and we should arrive about four-ish; something like that. If you ring up the R.T.O. they'll tell you the time of the train."

"Yes, all right. I'm so glad, Giles. It'll be wonderful

to see you! I think"—Mary added with a catch in her voice—"the good angels must have put the idea into your head."

"As for that, I wouldn't know." Her brother's infectious laugh followed his words over the wire. "Anyway—I must ring off, now. My train's signalled. Good-bye, dear. See you later."

Replacing the receiver and absent-mindedly tidying some papers on Henry's desk, Mary was aware of a sudden warm comfort in her heart, such as children experience when, waking frightened in the night, they are taken into their parents' room and told that nothing can harm them as long as father and mother are near.

Giles always gave her the same sense of security; and that he should be actually on his way and arriving within a few hours, just when she needed him most, appeared to Mary, little less than a miracle. Because, she knew now there was no mistake, and that she must have help and advice. Sylvia's photograph, with its shameless and perfidious inscription, showed what she was to Henry. The words—"From his own loving Sylvia", were a proof in themselves, since no woman would sign herself thus unless she had been given the right to do so, and knew for certain that the man to whom they were addressed, was as much in love with her as she with him.

Upon being told of her uncle's impending visit, Viola declared he must have a royal welcome and started off by filling every available vase with flowers, and putting them in all the rooms; an attention which, knowing what loving thought there was behind it, Father Ellison greatly appreciated, when he arrived at tea-time and entered the house.

Older than Mary by several years, he was tall and thin, with the face of a scholar and hair turned prematurely white: but his dark eyes were merry as well as shrewd; and putting an affectionate arm around his sister and kissing her, he said: "Well, isn't this nice! It's such a long time since I saw you, Mary. How's everything and everyone? Henry and Rick? No need to ask about Viola. I can see for myself that she's on top of the world. And prettier than ever."

"You oughtn't to say those sort of things in front of her, Giles. And let me look at you, darling. I do believe you're thinner; come and have some tea. I wonder when you ate last, and had a decent meal."

"That's easily answered. At breakfast this morning. And don't," Giles added, sinking into a comfortable chair, "talk to me about food. I've had enough in the past week to last me a lifetime. I think, like you, the nuns imagined I starved myself on principle. Heavens! how those good women fed me! And at every meal, one of the nuns would come popping in and out to see if I'd eaten everything they'd put on the table. No thank you," he waved Viola, with her plates of bread and butter and cakes, away. "I don't want anything, my child: only a drink of tea. What time does Henry usually get home, Mary? I suppose he's kept pretty busy at his job?"

Viola, cutting in before Mary had a chance to answer, said:

"Daddy is definitely overworked, poor darling. He's just a shadow of himself, Uncle Giles—even thinner than you. In fact, I believe he's got some terrible secret grief, and doesn't want us to know."

Her uncle, raising eyebrows which unlike his hair had remained very dark, said: "I'm sorry to hear that;

though I think you're worrying yourself unnecessarily. What do you say, Mary?"

Then, noticing the expression on his sister's face, and that she failed to make a reply, he went on, speaking in a casual tone of voice: "You must remember, Viola, that your father has a very responsible and worrying job; so if he gets a little het up at times, it's not to be wondered at."

But, being a priest and attuned to souls, he sensed something had happened and gone very wrong, and felt sure that either Henry or Mary—or possibly both—were involved in whatever the trouble was. And that he learned much sooner than he'd expected, because with Henry having to go over to Dr. Brigg's house after dinner, and Viola out at a whist drive, he and his sister were left by themselves; and knowing she would never get a better opportunity, Mary told him everything, quite simply, but without stressing her own grief and hurt.

Giles listened in silence; he'd heard the same kind of story Mary was relating many times before, and always, as now, been careful not to interrupt, but allowed the persons concerned to get the worry told and off their minds. And even when his sister had finished speaking, he still remained silent, so that she said a little desperately and with a nervous catch in her voice: "You're taking this very calmly, Giles. For heaven's sake say something! Don't just sit there, looking at me."

"What d'you expect me to do, Mary? Rampage around the room, and hurl impeachments against Henry, and call the wrath of God down on him? Actually, I need time to think; which, if you'll forgive my saying so, is what you've failed to do yourself."

"Giles! I've done nothing else! I've thought and

thought until my head's gone round. It's a wonder I have any brain left."

"But, Mary; that's not *thinking*. You've merely been creating chaos, and turning everything upside down in your mind. To think clearly, one has to be strictly impartial, quite dispassionate, and perfectly logical. I admit it's not easy; especially for women; feelings count so much with them, which is why they find it practically impossible to view a thing impersonally."

"That's not quite fair, Giles. After all, we've been given our feelings—I mean, we're not just stuffed dummies, immune from suffering and joy. Besides, it's different for you; you've been trained to think; you've had years and years of training, and been taught psychology and logic and heaven knows what. Well, I'm not clever, Giles, but I do know I've lost my husband's love, and that all the thinking in the world won't make it any easier to bear. I've got to have help, Giles; and tell me one thing—weren't you surprised to hear this about I'm sorry?"

Giles took a pipe and tobacco pouch out of his pocket, and with a courteous: "You don't mind, Mary?" started to fill it. Then, striking a match and holding it for a moment in his hand, he said: "Nothing ever really surprises me, my child—certainly not the things people do, or even the sins they commit. But, if you ask me whether I should have thought it likely that Henry would be unfaithful to you, my answer is no; which brings me to the whole crux of the matter, Mary. Are you quite sure of your facts? Do you know for certain that Henry and this woman are having what is commonly called an *affaire*? Have you ever asked him for the truth, and heard from his own lips that he has betrayed your love and trust?"

Mary shook her head, trying to keep back the tears.

"No? Well," Giles said, gently, "I think you should. At the moment, you've only heard this girl's version of the story; and however true it may have sounded, you ought not to condemn Henry without giving him a chance to vindicate himself. Even in law a man is innocent until he's proved guilty, you know."

"But Giles! you don't understand. I've had all the proof I need. Apart from what Sylvia told me—and of course it was true; she knew all about Henry . . . where he lived and his job; and the flat in town . . . oh, everything. She couldn't have made it up, possibly—there was the photograph in Henry's desk. Wasn't that proof? And the letters? I only saw the beginning of one, and how she addressed Henry, but it was enough. Then his manner is so queer at times, and he really does behave just as I imagine a man would who wanted to hide something from his wife."

"Very well," Giles conceded, "we'll assume Henry is guilty; in which case, we shall have to find the reason—because there is one, Mary; I'm certain of that—for his changing so completely in so short a time. It sometimes happens," Giles went on after a little pause, "that a wife is almost as much to blame as the husband, and brings this sort of trouble on herself, but that doesn't apply to you, Mary, and as far as your particular case is concerned, Henry alone is at fault. We ask ourselves, then—is he a sick man—that's possible. Or has he grown careless and neglected certain obligatory duties? I hate to probe, my dear, but I take it . . . Henry hasn't entirely given up his Faith."

"No; oh no! Of course not, Giles. He goes to Mass regularly. I don't mean in the week—he hasn't time—but always on Sundays and holidays."

"Well, that's something; in fact, it's a lot. What we have to decide now is, are you going to take my advice and tell Henry that the girl came to see you at the flat, or let things remain as they are. Personally, I think it would be far better to clear the air, and be finished with suspicion and distrust; it's more honest, Mary, and, in my opinion, the surest way of bringing Henry to his senses, and preventing him from ruining your life and his own. On the other hand, you can, as other wives do, just endure, and pray for a miracle to happen. It might quite easily . . . it probably will, if you pray hard enough. Or would you", Giles asked, speculatively, "like me to talk to Henry and see what I can do? You need not be afraid that I shall bully him—I have never as yet met a man who could be bullied out of his sins—though in this instance, I think, a little plain speaking and a few salutary warnings may be necessary." He added, gently: "I've handled dozens of similar cases, Mary, in my time, and usually with complete success."

"I know, Giles." The tears started to Mary's eyes. "I'm terribly grateful; and just talking to you about it has been an enormous relief. But don't, please, speak to Henry; he probably wouldn't take any notice of what you said; and I'd really rather leave things as they are—at any rate for the moment—and I can always send for you, if I'm ever in desperate need of help."

"Very well, my dear, if that's how you feel, we'll say no more. But always bear this in mind—Henry is your husband and you are his wife, and the only thing which can really part you is death. Also, for your comfort, Henry knows that as well as you do. It isn't as though he could make ignorance his excuse. Meanwhile, go on

with the good prayers; and another thing—bear with him, Mary, and be as patient as you can.”

“Yes, I will, I promise. I’ll do my very best,” said Mary; and added, simply: “It’s not hard to be patient with people we love.”

Chapter Eleven

GILES was surprised when he came out of the church the following morning, after saying his Mass, to find Henry waiting for him in the car. But all he said was: "Hello, Henry! What are you doing here so early?"

To which Henry replied: "I would have been earlier still if somebody'd had the sense to wake me up. How on earth did you get into Oakbridge, Giles? On the bus, I suppose."

"Yes, of course. And a very enjoyable ride it was: the country looking beautiful, and all the birds singing their hearts out, to cheer us on our way."

"You're crazy! You should have told me the time you were saying Mass. Anyway—get in; I can at least drive you back. Actually," Henry said, as his brother-in-law complied and they started off, "I quite thought that Mary had arranged transport for you, Giles, but, apparently, she forgot; and when Hetty told us you'd gone off by yourself, there was the devil to pay! I blamed Mary and she blamed me—we each said it was the other's fault—and only Viola kept her head. She ordered me to get out the car and come over straight away, otherwise you'd have to return home in the same manner as you went."

"Well, it wouldn't have mattered. Little things like that don't worry me unduly; though I am most grateful

to you, of course, for coming to fetch me, Henry, and also sorry to have caused dissensions between husband and wife."

"You mean Mary's and my little scrap? Oh, it didn't amount to much. Besides, scraps are getting quite common with us; to tell you the truth, Giles, and this is absolutely confidential, I can't do anything right, these days—at least, not in Mary's eyes. It isn't so much what she says but the way she says it, as though . . . oh I don't know how to explain. You'd have to be there to see what I mean."

Giles said: "Really, Henry!" just to appear interested while he did some rapid thinking; he also took a quick glance at his companion, and decided that Henry was either a most consummate actor or completely innocent, and wished to heaven he knew for certain which. He said, then: "I suppose what you're trying to say is, that Mary appears to suspect you of having wronged her in some way? Well, all I can say, as long as you haven't, there's no need to worry. Does that help you out of your difficulty?"

"No; not really." Henry hesitated. "I'm sorry, Giles; I oughtn't to have dragged you into this. Actually, there is something . . . I mean . . . if Mary ever got to hear about it she'd be worried, and probably terribly shocked. I'm sorry," he said, again, "I can't explain or say any more."

"I, also, am sorry, Henry; because, quite frankly, it seems to me that you have already either said too much or not enough. And if," Giles's voice took on a sterner note, "you are keeping something from Mary which, as your wife, she ought to know, my advice—though you haven't asked for it—is . . . don't. It's dangerous, Henry; it breeds distrust; and nothing breaks a mar-

riage up quicker than lack of trust between husband and wife."

Henry was silent, until stopping the car outside his gates, he said: "I'm sure you mean well, Giles, but, unfortunately, there are others concerned besides Mary and myself, and I have to consider them."

"Them?" Giles seized on the word.

Henry flushed. "I should have said- another person." Then, leaning over to open the door but not getting out himself, he added: "Will you tell Mary that I'm driving myself to work this morning. They're short of cars at the Station, I'll be home to dinner; see you then, Giles," and drove away, leaving his brother-in-law with no option but to think that Henry had involved himself with this wretched girl, and was either too much in love or too afraid to end the affair and break away from her.

The thought distressed Giles beyond words and he felt deeply grieved, but decided to say nothing to Mary, because she was obviously trying so hard to be brave; and for the remaining days of his visit she kept up a semblance of happiness—at what cost, only her brother knew.

By tacit consent, neither of them referred to the matter again; but on the morning Giles left—actually when they were at the station waiting for his train, Mary said: "I must tell you, Giles. You remember the photograph and letters I found in Henry's desk? They've gone . . . he's taken them away. I looked again this morning and they weren't there. Surely, Henry wouldn't carry Sylvia's photograph and her letters about with him, would he, Giles?"

Giles said: "No," most emphatically. "I expect he's burnt them, Mary," and would have given her added

comfort and reassurance, but at that moment the train came in, and all he had time to say was: "Good-bye, dear. God bless you. Let me know how things work out. I'll be down again very soon; or, if you need help, come up to me," which actually was a comfort in itself.

Mary found, too, that Giles's guess was right; Henry *had* burnt the letters and photograph, or at least he must have intended to do so, because according to Cookie, he'd come into the kitchen early that morning and been rather vexed to find no fire in the boiler.

"I'm very sorry, ma'am, that the master should have been so put out, but I told him we don't ever hardly light the boiler, once the warmer weather starts, seeing there's the immersion heater all handy, and coal the price it is. But that didn't seem to satisfy him, with a parcel ready to burn in his hand; and, as I say, I'm sorry. I even offered to light the fire, and he said no; they was private papers and perhaps it would be best to destroy them in his office after all, which, I suppose, is what he did."

Mary essayed a smile. "When did this happen, Cookie?"

"I can't rightly say the exact time, ma'am, but very early; leastways, Hetty hadn't come down, and a nice fright I got, seeing the master suddenly appear in his dressing-gown, when I'd imagined him sound asleep upstairs. The least I thought was that you'd been taken ill, ma'am, or Mrs. Delair maybe was dead! 'It's not often you come into my kitchen at six o'clock in the morning, sir,' I said; and all he does then is to laugh and say: 'No, Cookie, but don't worry, I'm not starting a precedent,' whatever that might mean."

"It's just another way of saying he'll never do it again," Mary explained; and opening the back door,

she walked out to the garden and stayed there awhile, looking up at the delicate green of the beech trees, and then on the flower-beds where, as a result of her labours, a mass of colourful beauty rivalled every imaginable scent. But of what use were all these possessions—her lovely house and garden; wealth with which she could command the service of others, and buy almost anything offered for sale—if Henry's love were lost to her?

She sat down to rest for a moment, on a white wooden seat, gazing on the peaceful scene in front of her eyes, listening to the restful country sounds—a cart creaking down the lane and the thwack of reins; the thin crowing of a cock in a distant farmyard, and, as a background to it all, the tiny song of summer insects and ceaseless droning of bees. The peace and beauty surrounding her brought an added ache to Mary's heart, wherein there already lay so much bitterness and grief. She heard the church clock striking three, then chime out its plaintive little tune, lingeringly and slightly off key: "My Lodging is on the Cold Ground"; and reminded of the time and that she hadn't seen her mother-in-law at all today, Mary got up slowly, and went back to the house.

She missed Giles's cheery presence, and wished he could have stayed longer; realizing, at the same time, that her brother had other ties, and owed a duty to numberless people who were of even more importance to him than his own family; and nothing, she knew, short of grave illness or death, would stop him from serving them.

This led her to think again of his advice and wonder if she ought to do as he said, and get the truth from Henry. She was beginning to feel that anything would

be better—or at least, it couldn't be worse—than this awful uncertainty . . . of not knowing whether Henry still regarded her as his wife, or merely a useful appendage to look after the family and run his house efficiently.

Already the barrier between them seemed to be insurmountable, but that it had ever been erected at all was, she must in fairness admit, mainly due to her coldness towards him, and attitude of enduring rather than welcoming any tender advances he made. Henry was no fool: he would know, by her obvious reluctance to receive even as much as a kiss from him and give one in return, that something had disrupted the almost idealistic happiness of their married life: yet not once had he given any indication that he regretted this, or that he felt the slightest compunction for having brought it about.

The situation, in fact, had got beyond Mary, and being honest, she admitted she was handling it in quite the wrong way—she must be—for things to have come to such a pass.

Viola, if placed in similar circumstances, would probably do far better, and very soon have her husband grovelling on his knees, begging forgiveness and to be taken back into favour again.

It was then that Mary realized Giles had been right; she must ask Henry for the truth, and try to heal the breach between them; and she would do it this very night, otherwise her courage might fail; though she ought not to feel afraid of Henry, and it was strange that she should, and proved how far they had drifted apart in these few short weeks.

Mary remembered then and felt glad that she had invited the Austleys and Miss Perry to tea, because having to entertain them would not only help to pass

the time, but also keep her unhappy thoughts at bay. Actually, all three of the visitors were stimulating and delightful companions. Mr. Austley had a dry humour, and could relate the funniest stories and keep a perfectly straight and even solemn face; while his wife was so glowingly young and so obviously in love with life that it cheered one up just to meet and talk to her; and since Miss Perry's sense of the ridiculous matched the vicar's, she could always be relied upon to make a party go.

Today, however, Mary found her attention wandering, and found it as much as she could do to appear amused and interested or even listen to what the others said. Fortunately the conversation wasn't putting much tax on anyone's intellect; and when Father Cleever arrived unexpectedly, and he and Mr. Austley started discussing pantisocracy (though how the subject cropped up nobody knew), they more or less had it to themselves, with Miss Perry throwing in a word or two here and there, and Mrs. Austley stating quite frankly that she hadn't the slightest idea what they were talking about.

Knowing quite well that, once launched, her husband could go on indefinitely, and judging Father Cleever to have the same staying powers, she saw no harm in confiding to Mary that her son had achieved three steps across the nursery, and was already showing signs of remarkable intelligence.

Viola, overhearing this, said she adored babies and intended to have at least six of her own; whereupon Miss Perry pointed out she would, in that case, need to marry a very rich man, speaking, however, a little primly because, when she was young, girls of eighteen didn't talk about having babies, at an afternoon tea

party, especially if gentlemen were present. Indeed, they never mentioned the subject at all; and Miss Perry was of the opinion that the young women of today would do well to follow this example, and be rather less free in their speech.

But Viola, it seemed, thought the reverse, and continued to go from bad to worse, saying now, quite openly, that so far she hadn't met any man she'd give a thank-you to marry.

"At least, the ones I like are all married: as for the rest, some of them bore me stiff and others are too silly for words. And if I do ever happen to meet someone who I think might be possible, and there have been one or two, it's always the same—he's got no money—so back I go on the shelf again!"

Mrs. Austley, rounding her eyes, said: "You're too fussy, Viola, and evidently want perfection; but you can't expect that in a husband, though some of us I know"—she gave a proud and proprietary glance towards her own—"are lucky enough to get it. I suppose", she went on, "you compare all the young men you meet with your own father and hope to find one who will come up to his standard; in which case, you'll have to wait a very long time, I'm afraid." She turned to Mary. "I know you will agree, Mrs. Delair, and won't mind my saying this, but we all think the world of Dr. Delair. He's such a wonderful person . . . so brilliantly clever . . . yet always gentle and kind to everyone. We ought to feel very honoured to have him living amongst us in Prior's Oak."

Miss Perry, amused, said: "Just listen to that, Mary! How I wish Henry were here! His ears must be red-hot. I doubt if he'll ever get a finer panegyric if he lives to be a hundred. Not but what I subscribe to every word

of it. And if Viola does intend to wait until she's found her father's equal, in both brains and character, she'll never marry at all but end up like me—an old maid."

"I don't really see why," Mary said, awkwardly. "I mean—there must be plenty of men in the world quite as clever as Henry and just as good."

The conversation distressed her and she wished it had taken any turn but this. Apart from being far too personal, she felt it was also hypocritical to go on eulogizing over Henry's character, knowing that in a very short while she must accuse him of something from which Miss Perry's staunch moral principles and little Mrs. Austley's innate goodness would shrink away in horror; something that she knew to be a deliberate and grievous sin, but so far, thank God, had managed to hide from others.

2

Mary watched the clock a little anxiously, not because she wanted to hurry her visitors away, but in fear that Henry would arrive home before they left. Mr. and Mrs. Austley, however, had to go soon after half-past five—the one to say Evensong and the other to put her baby to bed as this was nurse's night off, and Miss Perry said she'd walk along with them.

That left Father Clever, who never had the time to make lengthy visits; and when he'd told Mary what had really brought him to the house in the first place—that her brother had promised to come and give a Mission at the church, some time during the autumn, and how fortunate they were to get such a noted preacher as Father Ellison—he too went away, and Henry must

have passed him on the road, since, a few minutes later, Mary saw the car turning in at the gates, and the next second, or so it seemed, Henry came hurrying into the room.

She knew at once, by the expression on his face, that a crisis had arisen, because he looked angry as well as perturbed.

He said abruptly: "I must speak to you, Mary. Where can we go so that we're not disturbed? Is Viola out?"

"Yes; she's gone to see Alice; she won't be back just yet."

"All right. Then we'll stay here. And sit down. I can't talk when you're standing up."

Mary sat down on the nearest chair: in fact, she was more or less forced to do so, feeling strength deserting her; knowing now that Henry was about to tell the truth without being asked for it. For what might have been minutes or hours she waited, silent and strangely still, while he took two or three paces around the room. Then, coming over to her side, he said: "Mary, have you by any chance met or heard of a Miss Crayle . . . Sylvia Crayle?"

"Sylvia Crayle?" Mary repeated the name, fencing warily.

She had no intention of helping Henry or making this easy for him. "Why do you ask? Ought I to know her?"

"I see no reason." Henry's voice was positively vicious. "But, if what Colin says in his letter is true, you probably do. . . . In fact, you must, otherwise nothing makes sense. For God's sake, Mary, don't hedge! Have you or have you not met this girl?"

"Yes." Mary's lips were dry. "Actually, she came to see me at the flat."

"I thought so! The little . . ." Henry bit off the word. "And what did she have to say?"

Mary's eyes met Henry's in a steady gaze. "That question is quite unnecessary, Henry. You know exactly what she said. She told me what I've been hoping and praying to hear from you . . . the truth. And I have had to live with it, day after day, night after night, from that moment until now. And bear the grief alone, just waiting for you to speak."

Henry was silent. He looked perplexed and a little anxious, but not in the least like a man whose guilty secret was about to be revealed.

He said at last: "You're talking in riddles, Mary; but before you say any more, let me explain why I kept silent and let you remain in ignorance of this unhappy affair. It was because I knew you would take it badly and wanted to spare you the grief and shock."

"Henry!" Mary sounded as though she were almost beyond speech. "But . . . do you honestly mean to tell me that you intended to go on as if nothing had happened? Didn't you realize that I was bound to find out one day, and that it would be a far worse shock to hear the truth from . . . from Sylvia, or somebody else?"

"I do, now; and I see what a bad mistake I made. Though actually there was no necessity for you to be told, Mary, and I very much doubt if you would ever have found out if Sylvia hadn't called at the flat. And now tell me exactly what she said; and what you thought of her."

"You ask me that!" Mary's laugh held bitterness. "There was only one thing I could think of her . . . or of any woman who behaved as she did. I despised her, Henry . . . I even hated her for taking you away from me; and when she begged me to be generous and give

you your freedom—in other words, agree to a divorce—I wanted, for one dreadful moment, to kill her!”

Mary drew a shuddering sigh. “And I shall never forget the look on her face when she said: ‘I love your husband, and he loves me.’ I . . .”

She broke off suddenly, because Henry had taken her into his arms in such a way that she was compelled to meet his eyes, and the expression in them frightened her. He said:

“What is all this about divorce and giving me my freedom? You’re raving, Mary! You must be completely mad!”

“And if I am, can you wonder? And whose fault is it but yours! Hurting me like this . . . falling in love with another woman . . . meeting her secretly, and betraying my love and trust! Oh, Henry, how could you! And with a girl very little older than your own daughter! The shame of it . . . the disgrace! And you a Catholic! Oh, Henry, my darling, don’t let her come between us. Think of all the wonderfully happy years we’ve had together; and our children, Henry. Think of what it will mean to them if our marriage breaks up.”

Now the repressed grief of weeks was suddenly freed, Mary’s tears came easily and fell unheeded down her cheeks, and she felt the relief of having at last broken down the terrible barrier of silence which had been so hard to bear.

She realized then that Henry’s arms were still around her and would have drawn away; but he tightened his hold, and resting his lips against her hair, he whispered: “You darling and unutterably stupid little idiot! What am I to say to you! How clear myself of all those dreadful charges you brought against me? Which, incidentally are quite unfounded and entirely untrue. You don’t

really think that I've been having an *affaire* with Sylvia Crayle, Mary? You can't! It's too ridiculous; and what in heaven's name put such an idea into your head?"

Mary stared at him bemused. She said, a little falteringly:

"But, Henry . . . I told you . . . she called at the flat, that time I went up to London by myself. She'd seen me come out earlier in the afternoon. It was dreadful, Henry. She started right off by begging me to divorce my husband, because you were terribly in love with her, and it was my selfishness which was keeping you apart. Imagine how I felt! Oh, I don't know . . . I'm so muddled. What is the truth, Henry? You must tell me. Has there been some awful mistake? But how? Sylvia knew all about us—where we lived and the important work you did—and she said you'd fallen in love with each other at the Newbold's dance. D'you remember we came up for it on New Year's Eve? Apparently somebody pointed me out to her as being Mrs. Delair; and another time she saw us walking down Regent Street together. I know it sounds terribly involved, Henry, but all her facts were correct; and she put over such a plausible story", Mary ended, white and distraught, "that I hadn't a chance of disproving it."

"Don't worry, darling, I understand," Henry soothed her, tenderly; "and I know, now, exactly what happened. Sylvia mistook you for Primrose—she thought you were Colin's wife—and though I am entirely innocent, Mary, my brother, unfortunately, is nothing of the sort. He has, in fact, been every kind of a blackguard and behaved disgracefully."

"Colin!" Mary almost gasped. "You don't mean . . . Colin and Sylvia! Oh, Henry, no! It can't be true. And Primrose—does she know?"

Bewilderment together with relief and an overpowering joy were making it difficult for Mary to speak or even think coherently; but the one thing of which she could be certain was that Henry had never once wronged her, either in thought or deed. Colin, not Henry! Oh, dear God, the relief! And how in the name of reason could such a disastrous mistake have arisen and been brought about?

Still a little perplexed, she said: "I'm terribly tangled up, Henry, and don't yet understand what really happened. But before you explain, tell me I'm forgiven for being so wicked as to doubt you, my darling. I should have known, after all these years, that you could be trusted, and your love was entirely mine."

Henry kissed her. "It's always been yours and will be until death parts us. And I would give you my forgiveness willingly, dearest, if you were in need of it, but you're not. How could you help doubting me, faced with such convincing evidence of my guilt? And when I think of what you must have gone through that night, my sweet—all alone and in London by yourself—I feel Colin should be gaoled for life. Hanging's far too good for him! As to your mistaken identity, that's easily explained. First—you're pointed out to Sylvia as Mrs. Delair at the Newbold's dance; and, since Primrose wasn't there, she naturally concludes you are the wife of the fascinating and handsome Mr. Colin Delair, with whom, at a guess, she has already had supper and fallen desperately in love. Then, she speaks of having seen you in Regent Street with 'your husband'. I don't quite know when that could have been, do you? Were you and Colin ever strolling around London together?"

"Yes," Mary said, promptly, "it was the day we came up last February. You went to your meeting, and

Colin took me out to lunch. Don't you remember, Henry? We went to some place near Oxford Circus, and walked down Regent Street. Sylvia must have seen us, then."

Things were gradually becoming clearer; and as each piece of the puzzle was fitted and put into its right place, Mary began to see the complete picture shaping in front of her eyes.

"Meanwhile," Henry went on, "Colin and Sylvia have embarked upon one of those shoddy and abortive love affairs which seem to cause the persons concerned a disproportionate amount of worry, for the small amount of happiness they get out of it. Not that they deserve to have any, and I doubt very much if Colin did. He appeared to me to be in deadly fear of Primrose finding out, and had to keep Sylvia well in the background. She knew he lived in the country, but had no idea where it was--Colin wasn't taking any risks--and Sylvia would naturally refer to his job as being a most important one, because he probably told her it was. To hear Colin talk, you'd think he had all the affairs of State on his hands; and I can imagine the stories he put over about the responsibility he carried, and how people relied on him."

"And the flat, Henry? How did Sylvia know . . . I mean, it doesn't belong to Colin; you don't think . . .?" Mary flushed, not wishing to put her suspicions into words.

Henry said gravely: "I'm afraid so, Mary. We weren't to know, of course, when we allowed him to have the use of it for those two weeks, what he had in mind. But Colin must have worked the whole thing out and made his plans accordingly, though I can't be sure and wouldn't like to swear that Sylvia actually stayed

at the flat. When Colin confided his troubles to me, he refrained from going into full details, and the only thing I know for certain is that the young woman had been there often enough to find her way about; which was why she could come straight up to you that night, without having to ask Hadley for the number of our flat."

"Yes, I see. It all sounds so reasonable now you have explained, Henry; at least, I can understand how Sylvia mistook me for Colin's wife, but there are still a lot of questions I want to ask. Why, for instance——"

"Hold on a second, darling; I'm sorry to interrupt, only I've just remembered something which is a bit puzzling. Our names, Mary; how did Sylvia refer to Colin? I suppose she used the term 'your husband' all the time?"

"No; she did at first, of course, then suddenly came out with 'Gerrard', and knowing it was your second name, I . . ." Mary stopped; then, enlightenment breaking over her, she cried: "Oh, Henry! Don't you see! You're both called Gerrard—Colin and you—because it was your mother's maiden name. Why ever didn't I think of that at the time?"

"My poor darling! You were hardly in the state to think of anything, I imagine. But that does explain the mystery. And what, I wonder, possessed Colin to call himself Gerrard Delair?"

"For the same reason that I imputed to you, Henry. I've no doubt he felt it would be more discreet, and safer in every way."

Henry raised a quizzical eyebrow. "And you thought that of me?"

"Yes, Henry; I'm afraid so. And I also hoped—or rather—I wanted to believe that you wouldn't allow

Sylvia to call you 'Henry', because it was the name used by your family. A little thing, I know, compared to everything else, but I drew quite a lot of comfort from it."

Henry said: "Don't, Mary, please. The whole damnable business just won't bear thinking about! Sorry my English has got a bit mixed, but I'm too angry to bother. If only you had told me, darling . . . right away, the moment you came back from London, I could have cleared the matter up and saved you all this grief and anxiety. Why didn't you, Mary? It really was extraordinary to keep everything to yourself."

"I couldn't tell you, Henry. For two very good reasons. I wanted to save our marriage . . . that was the most important thing to do; and I hoped that if I waited and prayed hard enough, you would come back to me of your own accord. And then"—Mary shivered—"I didn't dare, Henry. You see . . . Sylvia wrote to me. It was a cruel letter, full of threats. She said that if I breathed a word to you about her coming to the flat, and your association was broken off as a result, she would kill herself, and leave a letter for the coroner, putting the blame on you. I know what it must sound like, Henry—pure melodrama—but she added a lot more and I was, quite frankly, frightened to death. I thought of the children and your mother; I envisaged the most terrifying things happening to us all, if Sylvia really did put herself out; and she struck me as being just the kind of unbalanced person to do a thing like that."

Henry shook his head. "No, darling, never. Miss Crayle is far too fond of life; and also, much too fond of Miss Sylvia Crayle. She's a girl who wants and intends to have quite a lot of jam on her bread, as well as plenty

of butter; and she would have been clever enough to sum you up, and know that threats of exposure and to bring disgrace on your husband and family would be the surest way of keeping you silent. Nor, I am sure, would she have given a thought to your sufferings, Mary, or cared a damn for them! And how," Henry added, smoothing the dark hair back from her forehead with a gentle and tender hand, "I'm ever going to make it up to you, darling, I don't know; but I'll try, and do my best, I promise . . . God helping me."

Chapter Twelve

KNOWING once again the comfort of Henry's arms around her, Mary said contentedly: "I'm quite satisfied with what you have already given me, dear; and the only thing I want now, is to know why you arrived home this evening looking so angry, and how you got mixed up in Colin's love affairs."

Henry smiled. "Your first question, dearest, will have to be answered last, because the reason for my being angry—and I'll admit I was-- ends the whole story. It begins, of course, with Colin meeting Sylvia at the Newbold's dance, but I don't appear until a little later on; actually, that day my brother arrived unexpectedly and spent one night with us. Do you remember?"

"Yes," Mary said, ruefully, "I have every reason for doing so. It was three o'clock before you came to bed."

"I know; I had to stay up until the small hours of the morning, and listen to my fool of a brother telling me how he'd started this business with Sylvia and landed himself into an almighty mess. Colin, of course, intended it to be just an amusing little interlude, but Sylvia had quite different ideas. She was, in fact, out for marriage, which put Colin into the awkward position of having to tell her the truth—that his wife would never agree to a divorce, and even if she did, he couldn't, as a Catholic, marry anyone else--though

knowing him, I imagine he used Primrose as an excuse far more than his Church."

Remembering the insults Sylvia had offered her, Mary said: "I'm quite certain he did. She naturally blamed me for everything, and insinuated that it was only my rigid principles and ridiculous attitude towards divorce which prevented her and 'my husband' from being happy for the rest of their lives."

"Of course; that's the line she would take. Anyway—there they were . . . at deadlock. Colin putting forward a very powerful reason for not being able to marry her, and Sylvia equally determined to become his wife; and, incidentally, growing a little suspicious and beginning to think that Colin's so-called reason was merely an excuse. Which brings us to where Miss Crayle decides to take matters into her own hands and see what she can do; and your visit to London, darling, and being at the flat, gave Sylvia the opportunity of meeting Colin's wife (as she thought) and disclosing the truth—an opportunity, needless to say, which, being a ruthless young woman, she seized upon—and carried the war into her enemy's camp."

"She implored me to be generous . . . generous, Henry! I remember thinking what a strange word it was to use; as though a wife who refused to give her husband up to another woman were the most selfish person in the world!"

"I agree, it's an odd idea; but then, people do get odd ideas into their heads. However—having heard from your own lips, as I imagine she did, that you would rather die than divorce your husband, Sylvia naturally starts making life one long hell for Colin; who, in his turn, passes it all on to me, either by letter or telephone, and sometimes a telegram, begging me as a brother to

do something about it and put him out of his misery. Honestly, Mary, I've been nearly demented, especially as we've had a lot to cope with at the Station, recently, and several important personages paying us visits. I've often had to stay late to get through my ordinary routine work."

Mary asked, suddenly: "Is that why you've looked so worried lately, and been so bad-tempered and cross with me?"

"Have I been cross?" said Henry; and added, compunctiously: "I'm sorry, dear; I certainly haven't meant to be. But, yes, I'll admit this affair has worried me badly. For one reason, I could never be sure what would happen; Sylvia had already threatened Colin with suicide and several other unpleasant things; and, above all, the truth had to be kept from Mother and you. I was terrified you'd find out, somehow; and I made Colin swear, the very first night he told me, that he'd never breathe a word of it to you."

"I suppose", Mary said, recalling the conversation she'd overheard, "he expected that I should be the first person to know, and was very surprised that you had no intention of telling me?" She asked, then: "And what about Primrose? Oh, Henry! It will nearly kill her. She lives entirely for Colin and thinks the world of him."

"Primrose doesn't know and she never will. But that reminds me; I had an awful scare the other day when she invited herself here. I thought the truth must have leaked out, and she was coming down to us for comfort and help."

"Yes; I remember now how relieved you were to get her letter in the morning; and I couldn't imagine why, Henry." Mary sighed. "So many things puzzled me;

and you really have been behaving very queerly, dear, these last few weeks, and dreadfully unkind to me, at times."

"And you naturally put it all down to the fact that I was carrying on an illicit love affair. Well, that's understandable. But," Henry went on after a little pause, "since we're speaking of behaviour, Mary, what about your own? Did it never occur to you that I was puzzled and deeply hurt by your coldness, and completely at a loss as to why you should have adopted such an attitude towards me? You must have known I hadn't the slightest idea that Sylvia had seen you and disclosed the truth, and realized what my reactions would be to your treating me as some kind of moral leper. Or were you too angry and outraged to care what I felt?"

"Probably: or perhaps too hurt and grieved, myself, to think of anything . . . except that I'd lost you, Henry, and had very little hope of your ever coming back to me."

Seeing the tears in her eyes, Henry said: "I understand, darling; and don't cry. It was only that I needed you so badly and the comfort of your love; and there seemed to be a terrible barrier between us which I couldn't break down."

"I felt the same; but, Henry, although everything is all right for us, what will happen to Colin and Primrose? Can we help in any way? It would be so sad if their marriage broke up."

"It won't; I promise. And I'll tell you why. You know I went to London the other day?"

"Yes." Mary smiled. "And because you came back so happy and cheerful, I thought you'd probably met Sylvia. In fact, I felt sure you had."

"Well," Henry said calmly, "you were right. I did. I met her at the flat; and for the first time in my life. Actually, it was the only thing to do; and I very soon settled the business . . . and Miss Crayle."

"But, Henry, how! What on earth did you do?"

"I started off by giving her a good talking to; it was necessary and most salutary. Having got that over, the rest was easy. A few words regarding the state of my brother's finances were enough; and as soon as I'd made it quite clear that Colin wasn't the man of wealth she'd imagined him to be, but comparatively poor, and only earning sufficient to keep himself and his family, Sylvia was not only willing, but anxious to take herself off. Poor men are of no use to girls like Miss Crayle; and knowing this, I took the liberty of finding out from Colin what money he had in the bank, and disclosing the amount, with his permission of course, to Sylvia. Needless to say, it wasn't much. He was in the 'blue' but only just."

Mary drew a deep breath. "Yes? And then what happened?"

"Oh! We discussed one or two things; and there were a few ends to be tied up and tucked in. Fortunately, Colin hadn't put a word on paper or committed himself in black and white. So that was that."

"Well . . . go on."

"I can't go on, Mary. I mean, I've told you everything. Sylvia and I parted—I won't say the best of friends—but quite peaceably. Then I met Colin, as arranged, and we had lunch together; and he handed over all Sylvia's letters . . . the ones she'd written to him, and her photograph, and asked me to burn the lot. Which I did, in one of the Station furnaces, because our boiler at home was out."

"Oh dear!" Mary started to laugh; then, checking herself, said: "Why couldn't Colin burn them himself? It seems so idiotic to make you do it."

"Well, I don't know. He said they reminded him of things he'd rather forget. He really is very repentant, Mary, and bitterly ashamed of the whole affair. It was quite easy for me to get rid of the letters; and once I'd seen him safely into the train and on his way back to Primrose, knowing, too, that he would never stray away from her again, the business was finished, and no longer any concern of mine."

"And that's the end of the story, I suppose."

"Very nearly but not quite. Because Sylvia, as a revenge and to have the last word, wrote to Colin. It seems that she'd been corresponding with him regularly throughout the affair, sending her letters to an accommodation address. I know it all sounds horrible, darling, and must appear shocking to you; but, unfortunately, those sort of things do happen, and sometimes between people who one always imagined were the most exemplary characters. Anyway—Colin very sensibly called at this place, wherever it was, to make sure that none of Sylvia's letters would be hanging around: she must have taken a chance that he'd do so, and hoped for the best; and luckily he found one . . . her last . . . in which the unhappy girl informed him in the most spiteful language she could think up, that she'd seen his wife at their London flat and told her everything. Which explains why I arrived home this evening in such a state. You see, darling, Colin rang me up immediately he got the letter; and as Primrose couldn't possibly have been either in London or our flat, we both decided Sylvia had made a mistake, and it was *you* she saw. It relieved Colin's mind, naturally,

but worried me to death; and I just had to discover what happened and find out the truth."

"It's a good thing you did, Henry, otherwise we might never have cleared up the misunderstanding. How strange that Sylvia's letter, written in a spirit of spite and bitterness, should be the means of bringing us together again."

"Yes, indeed, darling. And if, as I imagine," Henry said, thoughtfully, "Colin has been shaken out of his complacency, and made to realize that he owes a duty to Primrose, even this lapse of his is not without its uses: also, if Sylvia can be brought to see the error of her little ways—I thought we'd ask Giles to go along and have a word with her, because she is so terribly young, darling, and we can't just leave her to go from bad to worse—it will prove that good *can* come out of evil, which is a maxim I've never believed was true until now."

2

Outside in the garden a blackbird started to sing, and the reflected glory from an artist's sunset which was splashing its radiance across the sky flooded the room with golden light, so that Mary, turning quickly, said: "Oh! look, Henry! What a sunset," and walked towards the window, with Henry following her.

They stood there for a little while without speaking, but Henry put both arms around Mary's waist, and drew her to lean against him. And it was standing quite still, gazing out at the peaceful scene, that Viola found them, when she arrived without warning and suddenly flung open the door.

Taken aback, she exclaimed: "Good gracious! Whatever are you two supposed to be doing?" And Henry, without turning his head, said: "Well, what d'you think? Use your brain, child. We're enjoying the sunset which is really quite spectacular, though I don't suppose you've even noticed it."

"Of course I have; only what's so wonderful about a sunset? And I think it sounds silly to rave over Nature, like that awful Miss Thingummy who stayed with the Ringross's last summer. She was always saying things were 'too, too utterly' or 'entirely breathtaking'. No wonder Sir Walter made out he'd been called back to town and would be closing the house, and sent her off at the end of a week. And you and Mummy weren't just admiring the sunset, I know, standing there with your arms round each other, as though you'd gone all romantic and were still frightfully in love. If it had been *moonlight*, now, I could have understood; but a *sunset* . . . no; definitely not!"

Mary, blushing like a shy schoolgirl, said: "Darling, you must have seen Daddy put his arms round me hundreds of times in the course of your life, so why remark on it at this particular moment?"

"Oh, I don't know; perhaps because you looked quite different today. Anyway—it must be nice to feel like that after being married for twenty years, and I only hope I do."

Henry said, feelingly: "If any man puts up with you for twenty years he'll be sprouting wings. What you'll need, my child, is an angel, not a husband at all."

Viola laughed, and coming up to her father, put an affectionate arm around his neck. She said: "I'm only ragging, darling, and actually, you both looked sweet, standing together side by side like a bridegroom and

bride. Which reminds me . . . Alice has decided on a sweet-pea effect for her bridesmaids' dresses; and could you, please—Daddy, I mean—possibly lend Joe a cut-away coat. He'll have to be at the wedding, of course; I doubt if Tommy could get married without him, and he only possesses one suit—a dreadful brown affair with mauve stripes—but he can manage the trousers all right; I think Tommy's dug out an old pair. It's only the coat they're worried about, so I said I'd see what my Pa could do."

"Well," said Henry, "I don't know. For one thing, your Pa hasn't got a paunch like Joe's; though a morning coat doesn't have to meet, 'tis true."

While Mary added: "I doubt whether Rick's would fit him, either. One might as well try and fit Falstaff into Malvolio's clothes;" thinking at the same time how wonderful it was to be talking and laughing again with Henry, just as they had in the past and throughout their married life; and to know that she had nothing to hide and no terrible secret to keep from her children now.

Viola, having got her father's promise to see what he could do about rigging Joe out, produced a crumpled letter from the pocket of her coat and said: "This came by the afternoon post. It's from Rick. Did you know he was bringing his friend Gregson back with him, Mummy?"

"No, darling. I had no idea. Rick hasn't said anything to me."

"Well, he is. Rick seems to think the poor young man needs cheering up. Gregson's the one whose parents were divorced and got married again."

Henry said: "How, married again? D'you mean they patched things up and went through another ceremony?"

"No, darling. They married quite different people. Rick told me that some ghastly woman got hold of Gregson's father and took him away from his first wife. Which," Viola said, oracularly, "seems to me to be a pretty average beastly thing to do. I should simply loathe to have my husband taken away from me, wouldn't you, Mummy?"

But Henry spared Mary having to reply by saying quickly: "There's no need to discuss the subject, Viola, so, with your permission, this conversation is now closed." He added, gently: "You don't want to talk about unpleasant things like that, darling. They're no concern of yours, and I'd rather you didn't mention or speak of them again."

"All right, I won't," Viola said, cheerfully. "I agree, it's horrid, and . . . well, a bit frightening." She added, contentedly: "I'm glad you and Mummy are romantic, and still frightfully in love with each other. It makes us—Rick and me—feel so safe." Then, happening to glance across at her father and mother, she saw that they were smiling, and wondered why.

